

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

WE *BELIEVE* THESE TRUTHS: AMERICAN DEMOCRACY'S HUMANISTIC POLITICAL
ETHIC OF BELIEF

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For Lisa.

You never stopped believing.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	VI
ABSTRACT.....	IX
PREFACE.....	X
INTRODUCTION.....	1
OUTLINE OF THE PROJECT, KEY TERMS, ARGUMENTS, AND METHOD.....	12
KEY TERMS.....	15
METHOD AND STRUCTURE.....	23
PRINCIPLES OF SELECTION FOR MAIN INTERLOCUTORS: CONNECTED AND RELIGIOUS SOCIAL CRITICS	29
RECENT AND INFLUENTIAL APPROACHES TO RELIGION AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY IN SCHOLARLY LITERATURE: DELIBERATION, AGONISM, AND PROPHECY	32
A HERMENEUTIC AND DIALOGIC APPROACH TO RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY.....	57
1. JOHN DEWEY’S PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY OF DEMOCRACY.....	60
INTRODUCTION: STUDYING DEMOCRACY’S DOCTRINES.....	60
DEMOCRACY AS CONSCIOUSNESS.....	63
DEWEY’S LACUNA: INTERPRETATION.....	80
2. MICHAEL WALZER, THE PUBLIC, AND ITS PROPHETS	97
INTRODUCTION.....	97
WALZER’S SOCIAL CRITIC	99
THE RELIGIOUS SOCIAL CRITIC	113
RELIGIOUS SOCIAL CRITICISM AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY	130
3. JOHN COURTNEY MURRAY: THE “AMERICAN CONSENSUS” AND THE NATURAL LAW	136
INTRODUCTION.....	136
AN OBVIOUS OVERLAP	139
MURRAY’S CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING SOCIAL CRITICISM.....	149
MURRAY’S OVERLAPPING INTERPRETATIONS	176
CONCLUSION.....	197
4. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.: CHRISTIAN PERSONALISM, HUMAN DIGNITY AND THE “MEANING OF OUR CREED”.....	199
INTRODUCTION.....	199
AN OVERLOOKED OVERLAP	201
KING’S CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING SOCIAL CRITICISM.....	209
KING’S OVERLAPPING INTERPRETATIONS.....	216
CONCLUSION.....	233
5. ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL: THE DIVINE PATHOS AND HUMAN BEING AS A CATEGORY OF VALUE.....	235
INTRODUCTION.....	235
AN OBSCURE OVERLAP	240
HESCHEL’S CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING SOCIAL CRITICISM	252
HESCHEL’S OVERLAPPING INTERPRETATIONS	285

CONCLUSION.....	299
6. JOHN DEWEY: RELIGIOUS, NATURALISTIC, AND HUMANISTIC SOCIAL CRITICISM	301
INTRODUCTION.....	301
A RELIGIOUS SOCIAL CRITIC?	307
DEWEY’S CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING SOCIAL CRITICISM	310
DEWEY’S OVERLAPPING INTERPRETATIONS	329
THE OVERLAP: A HUMANISTIC AXIOLOGY.....	339
CONCLUSION.....	342
CONCLUSION: A PUBLIC AXIOLOGY	345
RESEARCH QUESTIONS REVISITED.....	345
A PUBLIC AXIOLOGY	348
LESSONS FOR THEORIZING RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY	353
CONCLUSION.....	357
BIBLIOGRAPHY	359

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Abstract

In We Believe These Truths: American Democracy's Humanistic Political Ethic of Belief, I argue that scholars whose work that relates religion and democracy in the United States generally miss American democracy's doxastic, hermeneutic, and dialogic dimensions—dimensions which are crucial for adequately capturing key aspects of its relationship to religion. I draw on and develop John Dewey's theory of democracy and Michael Walzer's theory of interpretation and social criticism to develop a hermeneutic and dialogic theory of democracy that can better capture these aspects of the relationship between religion and democracy in the United States.

I apply this theory of democracy to the religious social criticism of John Courtney Murray, S.J., Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and John Dewey, and show how it helps capture these dynamics. Doing so, I show how American democracy's ideal of popular sovereignty implies a humanistic axiology and I demonstrate how this humanistic axiology is in fact a "public" axiology whose underdetermined form both enables and requires hermeneutic mediation between democracy's humanistic axiology and those of diverse religious, moral, and philosophical worldviews in American society. The idea at the core of this hermeneutic, dialogic, and doxastic approach to democracy is that religious social critics, drawing as they do on their own traditions, can and do help democracy understand itself better, especially in response to the challenges to freedom, equality, and inclusivity which it regularly confronts. I show that American democracy gives rise to political prophets who remind us what democracy requires us to believe and what that belief looks like in real terms.

Preface

The following is a conversation, staged by me, between a few American philosophers, theologians, and social activists from the mid-twentieth century. It is also more fundamentally a conversation between me and my fellow Americans—all of those fellow present and future members of, i.e. believers in, American democracy. The topic of conversation: *What does our shared tradition of self-government require us to believe?*

To American democracy's faithful: the claims I make in this dissertation are as basic as they are bold, as familiar as they are fresh. I hope you feel at home in these pages, and perhaps better understand the connections between our political tradition and the ways you make sense of the world and your place in it.

To American democracy's agnostics: my suggestion that American democracy could possibly require us to believe anything will probably ring hollow in your ears, if it does not sound downright sacrilegious. To these readers: I hope you will not let the ringing in your ears prevent you from considering the facts of the case, or from being open to the possibility that what we *believe* might be crucial in constituting who we *are*, and more importantly, determining our possibilities for living together.

To American democracy's enemies: may these examples provide some evidence that diverse people have found some good in the American project of self-government, despite all of its problems and shortcomings. I ask that you examine the evidence with an open mind, one open to learning something about the *value* of self-government.

Introduction

We find it hard to believe that liberty could ever be lost in this country. But it can be lost, and it will be, if the time ever comes when these documents are regarded not as the supreme expression of our profound belief, but merely as curiosities in glass cases.¹

President Harry Truman, *Address at the National Archives Dedicating the New Shrine for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights*

It is not every decade that two books are published with the very same title. Yet, if you go to the card catalog and look for the title, *We Still Hold These Truths*, you will find two entries, one from 2004 and the other from 2009. These titles reference the Declaration of Independence's famous words:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, -- That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

In the early 2000s, more than one American thought not only that we had lost sight of these "truths" and their implications for legitimate government, but that reasserting them with the claim that "we *still* hold these truths" was important and urgent enough to defend it in print.

Despite the shared title, these texts are fraternal twins; in many ways, they could not be more different. On the one hand, Ronald L. Hirsch's short "pamphlet," *We Still Hold Truths: An American Manifesto* was written ahead of the 2004 presidential election as a practical, progressive, and Democratic response to George W. Bush's first term in office and "a new

¹ Harry Truman, "Address at the National Archives Dedicating the New Shrine for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights" (speech, Washington, D.C. December 15, 1952), The American Presidency Project, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-national-archives-dedicating-the-new-shrine-for-the-declaration-independence>.

Republican/Conservative movement.” Hirsch argues that this movement has begun to undermine the status of “these truths,” which he interprets to be belief in the traditional American balance between concern for individual rights and the public good as well as the “traditionally liberal American values that underlie it.”² Hirsch argues that this “Republican/Conservative movement” has undermined these commitments by favoring business, industrial, and financial interests over the public interest, siding with the rich over the poor, and imposing a minority religious viewpoint through government action. In response, he offers eleven short chapters aimed at making plain how attention to “these truths” help us diagnose the ways Republicans/Conservatives have betrayed American tradition and values, thereby pulling the wool from the eyes of Democrats. They are also aimed at helping Democrats learn from their mistakes by offering practical suggestions for policy and platform positions—conveniently provided ahead of the impending election.

On the other hand, Matthew Spalding’s book, *We Still Hold These Truth’s: Rediscovering our Principles, Reclaiming Our Future*, was published in the aftermath of President Barack Obama’s 2008 election. Spalding claims that America’s “first principles” have been betrayed by the Left, because the Left has given up on any notion of absolute truth. In response, he offers a Conservative blueprint for restoring belief in the absolute “truths” upon which America was founded. In his account, Spalding aims to first make “America’s principles” explicit for his reader “as they were understood by our founders, in the context of our nation’s history and its constitutional development from roots deep in Western civilization,” and then invites his reader to “rededicate” themselves to them.³ These “permanent truths,” Spalding argues, are those

² Ronald L. Hirsch, *We Still Hold These Truths: An American Manifesto* (College Station, TX; Virtualbookworm.com Publishing Inc., 2018), 1.

³ Matthew Spalding, *We Still Hold These Truths: Rediscovering Our Principles, Reclaiming Our Future*, (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2009), 4.

“proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and promulgated by the United States constitution.”⁴ Over the course of ten chapters, Spalding identifies ten “core principles that define our national creed and common purpose:” liberty, equality, natural rights, the consent of the governed, religious liberty, private property, rule of law, constitutionalism, self-government (political and moral), and independence.⁵ He asserts that it is the abandonment of these principles that has led directly to America’s diverse and many moral, social, and political ills. It is therefore these principles that must be rediscovered and reclaimed, says Spalding.⁶

Yet, even more striking than the sharp and prominent differences between these texts are their similarities. These are already apparent even from the brief summaries just provided. Despite offering radically different political points of view in response to two strikingly different U.S. Presidential administrations, their endorsement of different hermeneutics for interpreting American values and founding documents, and their sharply diverging conclusions, these texts employ the same method. They both appeal to and interpret, in one way or another, the beliefs they take to be constitutive of the American, democratic tradition of government in light of the nation’s pressing challenges. Both authors advise their compatriots: we inherit a certain set of political ideas through our political institutions and culture. Moreover, they suggest that we should “hold” them because our believing in them makes a difference in the real world. These authors take it for granted that our political beliefs *matter*.

For this reason, Hirsch’s and Spalding’s texts provide an ideal springboard into the topic of this dissertation. They provide a recent, convenient, and representative example of the cottage industry that has become (if it has not long been) the interpretation of American’s political

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Ibid., 4-5.

⁶ It is worth noting that this text provides few and inconsistent citations, claiming in a footnote on p. 3 that “all the quotes in this book can be found searchable database” at a no-longer-accessible website: WeHoldTheseTruths.org.

beliefs. I refer to this phenomenon as a “cottage industry” because it represents an unorganized practice that is carried out in various contexts by diverse people, both inside and outside of the academy.⁷ Though its contexts, methods, and media are diverse, it is an industry that trades in interpretations: politicians, ordinary Americans, as well as academics, pundits, and TV personalities all provide interpretations of American democracy’s core tenets, principles, values, and beliefs. Each hopes that the country will profit (and perhaps they themselves will too) from their interpretations of what we have, do, and should believe as Americans, democrats, patriots. Those participating in this cottage industry claim, in one way or another, Americans inherit a set of political beliefs, and these beliefs matter for understanding who we were and are as a nation, as well as how we got here and where we should go next.⁸

These texts as well as this cottage industry both suggest that American democracy entails what I will call a “political ethic of belief.”⁹ They all suggest that American democracy requires us to *believe* something, to take certain things to be *true*, in order to act how we ought in public and political life.¹⁰ The idea of an “ethic of belief” comes from the philosophical sub-field that studies the norms and values that govern belief-formation, belief-maintenance, and belief-

⁷ Even within the academy, this cottage industry is distinctly interdisciplinary, spanning the fields of history, philosophy, political science, religious studies, sociology, and law.

⁸ For recent examples of the products of this cottage industry within the academy see: Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2014); Patrick J. Deneen, *Democratic Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1997); Robert Tracy McKenzie, *We The Fallen People: The Founders and the Future of American Democracy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021); Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).

⁹ This political ethic of belief is resonant with what Robert N. Bellah identified in 1967 as the “religious dimension” of American political and national life and termed America’s “Civil Religion.” However, the political ethic of belief I aim to isolate would be just *one* among many features of what Bellah calls “Civil Religion in America.”

¹⁰ It is worth noting in this context that I use the term “belief” in its reverential sense. In this project, “belief” describes an attitude, disposition, or psychological state of trust or confidence in something or someone, that is at the same time a practical condition of human (collective) agency and action. It denotes a person’s or group’s orientation towards something they simply take to be true, and in fact must take to be true in order to act as they do. See section below titled “Belief and Political Ethic of Belief.”

relinquishment. For the purposes of this project, I will adapt this concept to denote a specifically “political ethic of belief” which, in a similar way, considers the role of political norms and values—those that come from and characterize our political tradition—in governing our belief-formation, belief-maintenance, and belief-relinquishment.¹¹ In what follows in this project, I will provide evidence not only for the existence of this political ethic of belief but also consider its significant implications for developing democratic theory for religiously plural societies such as the United States.

In fact, as Spalding, Hirsch, and others have well noticed, this political ethic of belief has precedent in the Founders’ statements themselves: American democracy started with the Founders professing certain beliefs. In this discourse, the Declaration of Independence is consistently referenced as a key statement of these beliefs. Examining in the famous and oft-cited passage in question, attention the verb “hold” brings the role of belief to the fore: “we *hold* these truths to be self-evident.” The signatories (we) are *declaring our belief* (hold) in certain propositions (these truths). Specifically, by “holding” anything about “all men,” the signatories to the Declaration make a claim about their beliefs regarding human beings.¹² They declare: first,

¹¹ Both the origin and the scope of the political norms governing such habits of belief-formation, belief-maintenance, and belief-relinquishment differ from the provenance and scope of those governing a more general ethic of belief. Specifically, the beliefs we hold, keep, and relinquish on the basis of such political norms are not *necessarily* demanded or justified by any more comprehensive worldview, be it metaphysical, epistemic, moral, philosophical, theological, or religious. Rather, the beliefs which I propose to study are those are demanded and justified by the particular axiology that emerges from democratic political life and its commitment to popular sovereignty.

¹² Many readers of the Declaration of Independence have debated the justifiability of interpreting the gendered phrase “all *men* are created equal” to denote the more inclusive usage of “men” as a synecdoche for the category of “human being.” On the one hand, those who are skeptical of interpreting the gendered language to denote “human being” often connect the document’s gendered use of “men” to the historical fact that the rights invoked were not generally or readily extended to many key minorities, including notably women and slaves. Thus, they conclude, “men” must be read as referring to white men with property.

On the other hand, those who prefer interpreting “men” as a synecdoche for “human being” generally stress that such an interpretation fits with common usage of the term in late eighteenth century. In *Our Declaration*, Danielle Allen provides a particularly persuasive interpretation of authorial intent by cross-referencing Thomas Jefferson’s usage of the word “men” in an omitted section of his original draft. In that section, Jefferson uses the word “men” as a synecdoche for those for sale at slave markets, which included men, women, and children. Thus, Allen concludes that Jefferson’s usage of “men” in the Declaration must refer to “all people,” (153-54). Moreover,

we believe certain things about human beings; second, these beliefs have implications for what constitutes legitimate human government. In this way, the signatories to the Declaration started the Revolutionary War—and American Democracy—with their joint profession of belief. In it, we find the seeds of American democracy’s humanistic political ethic of belief.¹³

Before turning to the details of my argument and its key terms, one should also note that American democracy’s humanistic political ethic of belief flows not only from the specific statements in the Declaration, as I suggested above. I do not want to suggest that it is merely a contingent part of our inherited political tradition. Rather, American democracy’s political ethic of belief flows from the humanistic axiology that is internal to its ideal of popular sovereignty—the notion that the ultimate political authority rests with “the people” or the “demos,” and the subsequent aspiration to govern accordingly. I use the phrase “humanistic axiology” in a general sense to refer to any theory of value that treats the human being as an important (if not the only) seat of value. However, in this study, I also use it in a more particular sense to refer to the content of American democracy’s political ethic of belief—what it requires belief *in*. Thus, the phrase “humanistic axiology” names the specific theory of value implicit in the ideal of popular sovereignty, and by virtue of its association with that ideal, the American democratic political tradition.¹⁴

many readers justify their more inclusive interpretation of the term by stressing that the authors wrote “better than they knew” and, regardless of exact authorial intent, provided the basis for the minorities whose rights were originally denied to eventually secure those civil rights in the United States. The thinkers I treat in this project all follow the second line of interpretation.

¹³ One must also note that, even as the drafters of the American Declaration of Independence penned that “we hold these truths to be self-evident,” they carefully avoided overt faith-language. Phrased instead in the language of self-evident truths and natural rights, this infamous line is often interpreted as a straightforward natural law or natural rights claim. Such an interpretation results in particular stress on the corresponding self-evidence of the “truths” in question regarding human equality, human life, liberty, happiness and the purpose of human government. However, this natural-rights-framing draws attention away from the fact that this clause also constitutes a profession of beliefs. “We hold these truths” must be understood to include the meaning “We *believe* these truths.”

¹⁴ See below section “Humanistic Axiology”.

Therefore, it is not only the tradition of American democracy as represented by the Declaration that makes humanistic belief-demands on us. In our democracy, “consent of the governed” means that—in a very practical sense—we can and do demand this belief from each other and that we are politically and democratically justified in so-doing. For example, in more recent decades, this exercise of popular sovereignty and its connection to American democracy’s political ethic of belief is notably visible in the demand for inclusion in the American polity and society made by marginalized Americans. The Civil Rights Movement provides many poignant and clear examples of instances in which the demand for inclusion entails a belief-demand that appeals to American democracy’s humanistic political ethic of belief, a number of which will appear in the chapters on Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

For the moment, one example from the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike perfectly illustrates this kind of exercise of popular sovereignty and the belief-demands it involves: the familiar Civil-Rights-era slogan “I Am a Man!” With this phrase, the striking sanitation workers demand that their compatriots believe in their value or dignity, a value which is specifically based on their humanity, and which they believe accords them the same rights as other American citizens. In doing so, they invoke American democracy’s humanistic axiology via an assertion of its political ethic of belief. This logic is evinced by the words of James Douglas, one of the striking sanitation workers in his interpretation of the events: “We felt we would have to let the city know that because we were sanitation workers, we were human beings. The signs we were carrying said ‘I Am a Man!’ And we were going to demand to have the same dignity and the same courtesy any other citizen of Memphis has.”¹⁵ This example demonstrates

¹⁵ American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, “AFSCME Martin Luther King Documentary ‘I Am A Man’ Memphis Sanitation Strike,” YouTube Video, 10:01, “AFSCME Council 5,” January 8, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vTqVspySE4>.

that, in our democratic tradition, the ideal of democracy requires not only the general belief in the value of human beings. More than that, it illustrates that American democracy also entails the connection of this belief to all of the particular human beings in our democratic society, and that individuals and groups can and do demand these beliefs and the corresponding actions from each other.¹⁶

Examples such as this also remind us that the acceptance of the Declaration's "truths" as self-evident cannot simply be assumed, no matter what the Framers' words suggest. Taken at face value, the framers' language of self-evidence and their natural-rights framing combine to suggest that assent to the Declaration's and American democracy's foundational propositions about equality, life, liberty, happiness, and the purpose of government will be, or can be, automatic. Yet, as the Sanitation Workers remind us, for some Americans, this automatic-ness is not at all clear.

Then as today, the stakes of this self-evidence could not be higher. This is the case because the self-evidentiary nature of "these truths" and the humanistic axiology upon which they are based directly concerns the attitudinal, dispositional, and psychological "buy in" to democracy's key values and propositions—what it takes to *believe* in democracy and act accordingly. It concerns our ability to view our compatriots, to borrow the language of Martin Luther King, Jr., as "somebody," and to treat them as such.

Thomas Jefferson himself was aware that the psychological "buy in" to democracy is something that is not so straightforward. In fact, the language of self-evidence was edited into the Declaration during the editing process by a committee comprising Jefferson, John Adams,

¹⁶ This feature of the American tradition of democracy also explains why the denial of an individual's or group's *humanity* has been and remains a key means to denying those individuals' and/or groups' Civil Rights in the United States.

Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston. In his original draft of the document, Jefferson proposed declaring not that these truths are self-evident, but rather that “we hold these truths to be *sacred & undeniable*.” These terms suggest that Jefferson understood that even if the propositions are “undeniable,” they still require some assistance to make the project of self-government work: we have to hold them sacred, revere them, esteem them. Stated in my terms: we have to believe them.

By suggesting that these propositions must be held as sacred, Jefferson’s draft suggests that assent to American democracy’s foundational propositions may not be as psychologically straightforward as the final version would have us believe. His language of “sacredness” already suggests that religion, or something like it, may have a role to play in getting Americans to understand, believe, or buy into these propositions. Indeed, the main shortcoming with the language of self-evidence and natural rights is that it effectively sidesteps the issue of the extent to which democracy and its values rely on other philosophical, moral, and/or religious traditions to render its norms and values intelligible, meaningful, and worthy of belief. And this despite the fact that Jefferson’s draft already suggests an awareness of the overlapping, hermeneutic, and dialogic relationship between democracy’s axiology and the diverse religious, moral, and philosophical traditions in public life.

Danielle Allen’s recent interpretation of the Declaration of Independence and its contemporary significance evinces a similar awareness. In her discussion of the philosophical and religious grounding for the document’s claims about liberty and equality she writes:

You do not have to be a Christian to accept the argument of the Declaration...You do not need to be a theist to accept the argument of the Declaration. You do, however, require an alternative ground for a maximally strong commitment to the right of other people to survive and to govern themselves. One needs a reason to commit to other people’s

survival and freedom so strong as to command one's reverence. One way or another, one must hold sacred the flourishing of others.¹⁷

In this way, Allen also suggests that the Declaration implies a political ethic of belief—it requires one both to “hold sacred” the flourishing of her compatriots and also commit to do so in terms that are meaningful to her. Thus, Allen, too, suggests not only that this political ethic of belief is an important part of the American democratic tradition, but that it plays a role in relating the values of democracy to other (kinds of) value systems in American society.

At this point, it is worth noting that Allen's and Jefferson's sensitivity to the connections between American's political beliefs and their beliefs about things sacred, religious, philosophical, and moral sharply contrasts with Spalding's and Hirsch's texts. Neither Spalding nor Hirsch engage religion as a primary hermeneutic through which to understand and make sense of “these truths.” They interpret the meaning of these truths for their audience in primarily political and practical terms, and indeed treat them as “self-evident” in many ways. Given that their texts are politically oriented and aimed at a religiously diverse American audience, this fact is as unsurprising as it is understandable. Yet, I think that Jefferson's and Allen's suggestion that American democracy's values are neither self-justifying nor fully intelligible in terms of political-democratic discourse challenges Spalding and Hirsch to consider whether their approach is overly quick and/or facile.

This contrast is all the more striking if we compare their approach with an older counterpart, which features prominently in Chapter 3 of this dissertation: John Courtney Murray's 1960 book, *We Hold These Truths*.¹⁸ It is unclear whether Spalding and/or Hirsch are aware of Murray's text, the similar titles, or that their books follow in the lineage of Murray's

¹⁷ Allen, *Our Declaration*, 138.

¹⁸ John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005).

work. Indeed, in his text, Murray has much the same agenda and method: he published the book in the run-up to the election of President John F. Kennedy and aimed to reinterpret “truths” of the “American proposition”, or American-democratic political tradition, in order to invite Americans to rededicate themselves to these truths, and then draw on them to face the problems of the day.

However, there is one striking difference in Murray’s agenda and approach that it is extremely illuminating: the role of religion in the interpretations provided. In contrast to Hirsch and Spalding, Murray intentionally interprets American democracy’s political propositions in Roman Catholic terms. Indeed, Murray offers interpretations of America’s “truths” that are specifically Catholic, as the subtitle, *Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, makes abundantly clear. Part of the reason for this choice is the fact that Murray was invited to collect these essays in the run-up to President Kennedy’s election precisely because Kennedy was set to become the first Roman Catholic President of the United States. Following a long history of anti-Catholicism among American Protestants, Murray hoped to make plain to all Americans that American democracy and Roman-Catholicism were compatible traditions. More importantly for the analysis at hand, Murray’s interpretations suggest that Americans’ political beliefs, values, and ideals are importantly (if not necessarily) related to their other beliefs and values. It does not treat political beliefs as somehow isolated or independent from other arenas and types of discourse in society, but rather shows how they are in dialogue. In doing so, Murray’s approach resonates with Jefferson’s and Allen’s and challenges that of Spalding’s and Hirsch’s.

Stated in this way, this point about democracy’s ethic of belief sounds so obvious as to seem banal. Our beliefs are not isolated from our other beliefs; in fact, they are related. Yet, I believe that theorists of democracy and religion have neither adequately accounted for this relation, nor for all of its theoretical implications. In the chapters that follow, I follow

Jefferson's, Murray's, and Allen's lead and consider what it would look like to understand the normative dimensions of American democracy as necessarily and hermeneutically in conversation with the other (kinds of) religious, philosophical, and moral value systems in American society. By identifying American democracy's humanistic axiology, including the ways that it grounds a political ethic of belief, I make plain how it functions to establish a hermeneutic and dialogic relationship between democracy's normative dimensions and the diverse religious, moral, and philosophical traditions in American public life. I will show that, in the American model of democracy, a citizen is, in an important sense, encouraged to and even required to make sense of her political beliefs vis-à-vis her religious, moral, and philosophical beliefs and vice versa: they are necessarily in conversation.

Outline of the Project, Key Terms, Arguments, and Method

In this dissertation, I consider three research questions:

1. What does the American tradition of democracy require us to believe?
2. How does (or can) religion relate to this political ethic of belief?
3. How can American democracy be justified in requiring us to believe anything at all?

I answer these questions by defending the following thesis: *American democracy's ideal of popular sovereignty entails a humanistic axiology that requires belief in the equal value of the human person, a belief which manifests as an individual and collective consciousness of the value of our fellow Americans (Question 1). This humanistic axiology's public and underdetermined form both enables and requires hermeneutic mediation between democracy's humanistic axiology and those of diverse religious, moral, and philosophical worldviews in American society (Question 2). Furthermore, this feature of American democracy suggests a*

hermeneutic and dialogic dimension to popular sovereignty, which understands the consent of the governed to involve Americans interpreting their political beliefs in the terms that are most meaningful to them, without infringing their hermeneutic freedom or equality by passing judgment on or limiting those terms (Question 3).

In defense of these claims, I will consider the statements of four religious social critics as evidence of the role that the various religious, philosophical, and moral traditions in a democratic society play in the efforts of that society's members to make sense of their own inherited political ideals, institutions, culture, and values. I will do so by showing the ways in which Americans themselves make sense of American democracy's humanistic axiology in overlapping terms: ones that draw on those of the political tradition of American democracy as well as religious, philosophical, and/or moral terms that are particular to them, their tradition, and their community. To accomplish this task, I draw on the examples of four religious social critics: Fr. John Courtney Murray, S.J.; Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel; and John Dewey. I will demonstrate that many of these critics' appeals to American democracy's humanistic axiology and political ethic of belief appear alongside (and in fact invite) their invocation/citation of other, explicitly non-political beliefs about human beings, the world, morality, as well as divine matters.

Proceeding in this way, I demonstrate throughout the project that religion helps these Americans to identify and know American democracy's humanistic values to be such, as well as helps them to make sense of the obligations these values entail in terms that are meaningful to them. This observation already foreshadows the project's first conclusion: that this overlap is highly significant because it suggests that these political values and obligations can only be identified, known, and inhabited hermeneutically and dialogically.

It also foreshadows my second conclusion about the implications of American democracy's political ethic of belief for democratic theory: it is an important condition of possibility for its liberality. By defining, circumscribing, and requiring belief in this humanistic axiology, American democracy's political ethic of belief constitutes a condition of possibility for its ability to truly pursue the liberal ideals of equality and freedom in a society characterized by religious pluralism. I will demonstrate that it functions as a condition of equality by submitting all would-be Americans equally to the same belief-requirement. I will further show that, by doing so, it also facilitates freedom: by defining its content, thereby circumscribing its scope, and equally requiring a certain kind of belief for political purposes, American democracy's political ethic of belief frees Americans to "hold" these beliefs in whatever terms are most meaningful to them. In this way, American democracy's political ethic of belief constitutes a foundational condition of both equality and freedom in the United States, and in turn functions as a mediating force between religious, moral, and philosophical traditions and the political tradition as well as between religionists from diverse traditions.

What emerges from this analysis is what I call a hermeneutic and dialogic picture of democracy. On this picture, democracy is understood and justified not simply as a set of procedures, or a table of values, but as an expression of the axiology internal to the ideal of self-government/popular sovereignty: an individual and collective consciousness of the value of persons—specifically, our fellow Americans. To put it briefly, this approach treats democracy as a source of normativity that involves belief-demands on its members that result in an awareness of this value. Furthermore, because it requires the endorsement of its humanistic axiology but leaves open the terms in which its members can do so, on this picture, democracy works, on this

understanding, to mediate between diverse value systems by requiring its members to interpret their inherited political values in the terms that are most meaningful to them.

Key Terms

With the basic contours of my argument and its preliminary conclusions in view, and in order to more fully introduce this project, I will briefly define the project's key terms and explain how I will conceptualize democracy, religion, a humanistic axiology, and a political ethic of belief.

Democracy and Popular Sovereignty

While particular definitions of democracy are multiple, the term most generally denotes a form of government in which the people (“demos”) hold the governing authority. This principle is often referred to as “popular sovereignty” and is foundational in Western, democratic political thought. It is also invoked in the U.S. Constitution's famous “We the people” and the Declaration of Independence's discussion of legitimate government. Therefore, I first and foremost understand the ideal of democracy to fundamentally and characteristically look to “the people” as the principle of legitimate government.

Second, because my topic is the political ethic of *belief* that arises from this form of government, I need to work with a theory of democracy that takes seriously the possibility that democracy makes belief-demands. As Corey Brettschneider helpfully points out, conceptualizations of democracy generally fall into two categories: procedural or substantive democracy. On the one hand, a procedural interpretation of democracy understands values, outcomes, inputs, and arrangements to be justified procedurally (e.g., by voting) and thus

assumes it is “neutral” to whatever the substance those values, outcomes, inputs, and arrangements are (including the content of its members’ individual worldviews or religious traditions). On the other, a substantive interpretation of democracy understands democracy as consisting in its own comprehensive tradition which brings its own norms and values that are importantly procedure-independent.¹⁹ While these norms and values are often expressed, institutionalized, taught, learned, and perpetuated through such procedures, they are not justified by those procedures. Rather, the norms and values orient these procedures to democratic ends and justify them as sufficiently democratic. Because my project will examine democracy’s normative dimensions—something whose importance a “purely” procedural approach would question from the start—I therefore necessarily assume democracy to be importantly substantive in character.

A substantive conceptualization of democracy is a step in the right direction for considering democracy’s normative foundations and their connection to political beliefs. However, this approach still fails to capture a key aspect of the political ethic of belief I aim to study. Here too, Brettschneider’s value theory of democracy provides a helpful example. His substantive value theory of democracy focuses on defining the “democratic ideal” according to the values of 1) equality of interests, 2) political autonomy, and 3) reciprocity.²⁰ Yet, Brettschneider’s model simply takes the normativity of these political values for granted. He fails to explore how people come to understand their meaning and interpret them to be true, what is involved in such belief, or what such belief means in theoretical and practical terms.

¹⁹ Corey Lang Brettschneider, *Democratic Rights: The Substance of Self-Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 23-27.

These are the questions that we need to answer if we are going to make sense of American democracy's political ethic of belief and the cottage industry that trades in appeals to it. Therefore, I aim to think beyond mere procedural and substantive conceptualizations: I consider the "substance" that democracy requires us to value or hold as good (a humanistic axiology) as involving a psychological orientation of reverence not fully captured by a conceptual focus on democracy's norms and values themselves.²¹ And because my topic draws attention to these psychological considerations—or what might be termed the moral psychology of democracy—I employ a conceptualization of democracy that can account for these dynamics.

Specifically, I employ John Dewey's theory of democracy as well as his reflections on the role of belief in democracy to push such approaches to democracy in a new direction. I draw specifically on Dewey's psychological interpretation of democracy as a consciousness of "The Public" to conceptualize the dynamics involved in the humanistic axiology implied by popular sovereignty. I argue that "The Public" is Dewey's term of art for the popular sovereign understood psychologically: Dewey uses the term to refer to the collective that results from participating in combined actions whose consequences affect others beyond those immediately involved. To exercise democratic, popular sovereignty on this picture, there must be "reflection" on these consequences of combined action, which Dewey argues generates a shared interest among the group and thereby transforms the interconnected behavior into collective action that

²¹ A notable exception to both the procedural and substantive models is Martha Nussbaum's *Political Emotions* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013). In it, Nussbaum addresses a closely related, though distinct, issue in political philosophy. She keenly stresses the importance to democracy of an individual's psychological state, emotional disposition, her feelings. While this emphasis on the political emotions helpfully brings to light the importance of certain dispositional qualities to democratic politics, it does not address the question of political belief, as I define it above. Where she considers the justifiability of a liberal, democratic state inculcating love and devotion to its political ideals, I consider the justifiability of requiring and the (particularly religious) resources for encouraging—not love and devotion—but *belief* in those ideals. Diverging from Nussbaum, I ask not what it means for an individual to *love* the ideal(s) of democracy, but to take these political ideals to be *true*.

can be regulated according to collective aims, desires, and purposes.²² He also provides another term of art which names threats to popular sovereignty: an “Eclipse of the Public” is an obfuscation or frustration of the ability to perceive the consequences in question, and thus by extension, to act in light of them.²³ As such, Dewey’s conceptualization of the ideal of democracy and its constitutive notion of popular sovereignty are well suited to my topic because they acknowledge democracy’s nature as a “substantive” ideal that assumes the value of the political others with which we find ourselves in community *and* focuses intensely on the moral psychology of democracy. In short, Dewey takes it as given that democracy involves a certain consciousness or orientation from its members and that this orientation is connected to their beliefs. In Chapter 1, I will flesh-out and problematize this reading of Dewey’s political philosophy and, in Chapter 6, I will return to Dewey to examine his own legacy as a religious social critic who draws on symbols from his own, comprehensive philosophical view, or “humanistic naturalism” as well as from the American democratic tradition in order to articulate his own overlapping interpretation of the problems facing American society.

Religion

For the purposes of this project, I understand “religion” to be both a first-order concept used by historical actors in self-description as well as a description of others’ communities of belief and practice, and also as a second-order analytic category that theorists, policy-makers, and others use to construct theories and make comparisons across times and places. In both cases, the concept’s cultural referents are not static, but dynamic. Therefore, in my effort to

²² John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1976), 149-152.

²³ See Chapter 1 for a full discussion of these ideas.

discuss the relation of religion and democracy in the United States, I do not presume that “religion” has an unchanging essence.²⁴

Rather, given the specific goals of this project, I focus on four key features of the religious, philosophical, and moral traditions in question as they relate to American society and democracy: 1) their normative aspect: as important sources of normativity for their adherents, 2) their semiotic aspect: as storehouses of signs and symbols whose importance is often attributed to some transcendent source or status and which are at play in all kinds of social discourse, 3) their place and activity in society: as associations of institutions and actors who can particularly effectively mobilize the above signs and symbols, and 4) their constitutional status of “dual sovereignty” in the United States, which is my term to refer to the domain of non-legal authority that is equally sovereign to that of the state that the First Amendment accords for religion in American society.²⁵

Humanistic Axiology

I use the term “humanistic axiology,” as I noted above, to name a theory of value that understands the human being or human person to be a source (if not the only) of value. It must be noted that I use this term in an underdetermined and generic sense, not to denote any particular theories, but rather a theory of value that can be part of or embedded in any number of ideologies, theories, theologies, philosophies, etc. As such, when I argue that the tradition of American democracy requires belief in a humanistic axiology, the phrase “humanistic axiology”

²⁴ Tisa Joy Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 13-14.

²⁵ I have chosen to emphasize the semiotic dimensions of religious traditions due to my theoretical reliance on both John Dewey and Michael Walzer. In *The Public and Its Problems* Dewey relies on semiotics in overcoming eclipses of the Public, and I aim to similarly explore the contributions that specifically *religious* signs and symbols invoked by religious actors have made and can make to overcoming such Deweyan “eclipses” of the Public, particularly when invoked by the kind of social critics Walzer has in mind.

denotes the relatively stable theory of value endorsed by the political tradition and implicated in its organizing ideal of popular sovereignty. Nevertheless, because this theory of value is underdetermined and informed by the diverse and multiple religious, philosophical, and moral traditions that are found in American society, it is not static, but dynamic. As I demonstrate in detail in the chapters that follow, this theory of value remains in conversation with the other value systems in American society. As such, its meaning is liable to shift over time, even if not to a very great degree.

Belief and Political Ethic of Belief

I use a specialized conceptualization of “belief” that will afford the concept of a “political ethic of belief” the specificity and flexibility to distinguish and relate all the key elements of my proposed argument. Specifically, I use the term “belief” in a reverential sense to describe an attitude, disposition, or psychological state of complete trust or confidence in something or someone, that is at the same time a practical condition of human (collective) agency and action. It denotes a person’s or group’s orientation towards something that they take to be true, regardless of their mode of apprehension of that truth, and that they in fact must take it to be true in order to act as they do.

It is this understanding of belief that informs my claim that American democracy entails a political ethic of belief. With this definition in mind, it becomes immediately apparent, then, that my argument involves the claim that American democracy requires a certain reverence for the political other that is a practical condition of human (collective) agency and action. As I will show in the chapters that follow, the religious social critics in this study all think that a certain consciousness is connected to understanding and interpreting the value of the human person to be

true, and that this consciousness—this reverence for the political other—makes possible (collective) endeavors that would otherwise be foreclosed.

Because the concept of a political ethic of belief plays such a key role in the project, brief elaboration on its features and relationship to the philosophical sub-field that studies the “ethics of belief” proves instructive. The sub-field’s central question can be summarized as: when and under what conditions am I justified or not justified in believing something? As such, it provides a helpful starting point for thinking through when and under what conditions *democracy* might justify a belief or require us to believe something. Without engaging in a detailed exposition of all the debates surrounding the “ethics of belief,” a brief consideration of the essay that started the conversation, “The Ethics of Belief,” written by mathematician and philosopher William Kingdon Clifford in 1877, provides a helpful touchstone. In it, Clifford explores the role of evidence in justifying a belief. It famous for a story and a principle, both of which help introduce this sub-field and our topic.

The role of the story in Clifford’s essay can be summarized as follows: Clifford famously excoriates the owner of a ship who sold tickets, boarded passengers, and let the ship set sail despite having good evidence that the ship was not structurally sound. Clifford decries the fact that, despite such evidence, the owner of the ship convinced himself to believe that the ship was voyage-worthy.²⁶ Such beliefs, Clifford says, cannot be justified because they are based on insufficient evidence or disregard relevant evidence at hand. Not only does Clifford’s illustration demonstrate the central role that “evidence” plays in thinking about the ethics of belief. It also helps to introduce and explain the ethical principle that captures the ethics of belief for Clifford:

²⁶ William Kingdon Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief” in *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* ed. T. Madigan, Amherst (MA: Prometheus, 1999), 70–96.

“It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.”²⁷
We are obligated always and everywhere to believe on sufficient evidence, and it is wrong not to do so.

Of course, stating this ethic of belief in the form of this principle invites as many questions as it answers: What exactly is the nature of belief and how does it relate to the evidence in question? What counts as relevant evidence in the first place, and who decides? And how much of that evidence makes it sufficient? And many not everyone agrees with Clifford’s assessment of the role of evidence in belief-formation and justification. Most famously, American philosopher William James levied a non-evidentialist critique of Clifford’s position, arguing that there are cases where we are not only justified in but required to form beliefs despite lacking sufficient evidence.²⁸

However, these debates fall beyond the scope of this project, and some of them are beside the point. This is because I am not using the concept of a political ethic of belief to query the justificatory role of evidence in belief generally, as do ethicists of belief. Rather, I am using it to query the justificatory role of a political ideal and arrangement with regard to specific beliefs, which I am calling “political beliefs.” I use the term “political” to refer to that which orders life in the collective(s) of which we find ourselves a part, in all of its manifestations and dimensions. This focus helps me ask and answer the question I aim to explore in this project: what beliefs are justified and/or required by both the fact of and the aspiration to collective self-rule? That is to say, what is the ethic of belief that is involved in American democracy’s tradition of ordering our collective live according to the ideal of popular sovereignty? Framing the question in this way helps me to argue that regulative ideal for political beliefs that is involved in American

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ William James, *The Will to Believe* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1897).

democracy's commitment to popular sovereignty is what I am calling a humanistic axiology: a theory of the value of the human person.

Method and Structure

As I suggested above, my aim in this project to contribute to normative democratic theory, a body of thought that addresses democracy's values and moral foundations. Therefore, I do not adopt a strictly descriptive or social-scientific method. Rather, in Chapters 1 and 2, I combine parts of Michael Walzer's theory of interpretation and social criticism in *Interpretation and Social Criticism* and John Dewey's semiotic theory of popular sovereignty in *The Public and Its Problems* to frame a hermeneutic and dialogic approach to the study of American democracy's normative dimensions.²⁹ Combining insights from Dewey and Walzer, I will outline a hermeneutic and dialogic theory of democracy, a theory of overlapping interpretations, and a hermeneutics of political belief, all of which are necessary for this study of American democracy's political ethic of belief.

I will consider each of the relevant aspects of Dewey's political theory in Chapter 1. Recall that I will adopt Dewey's theory of democracy in order to consider the moral-psychological demands that democracy makes on its members. Further recall that Dewey defines democracy as a clear consciousness of communal life that results from reflection upon the consequences of combined action that affects others. As such, his theory of democracy highlights moral-psychological aspects of democracy in the form of his emphasis on the importance of this

²⁹ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, (Sage Books. Chicago: Swallow Press, 1976); Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Tanner Lectures on Human Values, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

clear consciousness of communal life, his stress on the danger of threats to it by “Eclipses of the Public,” and his endorsement of semiotics in overcoming such an “Eclipse.”

Yet, I do not adopt Dewey’s framework and its interpretation of popular sovereignty wholesale because I find it to be incomplete. In his endorsement of a semiotics of social inquiry, Dewey maintains that the kind of symbolic communication that will overcome an eclipse of this consciousness will be effected through experts pursuing social inquiry and artists fully and movingly communicating the results of such inquiry.³⁰ However, I show in Chapter 1 that even on his own terms, his conception of the actors and institutions that will effect such meaningful communication of the consequences combined action is too narrow. Each of my four chosen religious social critics challenges Dewey to consider whether a certain kind of social criticism levied on the basis of American democracy’s political ethic of belief works to counteract such eclipses of the Public.

To capture these dynamics theoretically, Michael Walzer’s theory of social criticism and interpretation proves extremely helpful. To show this, I will draw on Walzer in Chapter 2 to extend Dewey’s theory of democracy to consider the role of social critics and social criticism in overcoming an “Eclipse of the Public.” Combining Dewey’s and Walzer’s approaches, I argue that the Public stands in regular danger of “eclipse” and therefore requires consistent interpretation by social critics (or “prophets” of this “Public”) so that its meaning is made evident and it is consistently held in our (collective) consciousness. I aim to show that, in order to defend against and overcome its eventual eclipse, the Public—and thus American democracy—needs social critics to interpret the consequences of combined action in light of the beliefs central to our shared, democratic tradition.

³⁰ Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 180, 177.

Yet, Walzer's theory is not without its shortcomings, particularly regarding the implications of the multiple, intersecting memberships of the religious social critics in question. I will argue that his theory needs to do a better job of relating those social meanings shared by an entire community to those meanings shared only by some members of that community. Therefore, I will amend his theory of interpretation and social criticism by offering both a theory of overlapping interpretations which accounts for the ways that these religious social critics, in their appeals to American democracy's political ethic of belief, trade in the *overlap* of the meanings of the religious and political terms they use to levy their criticism. This emendation makes it possible for me to combine this theory of democracy and theory of overlapping interpretations to outline a hermeneutics of political belief which I can use to identify and scrutinize the political beliefs required by American democracy.

The idea at the core of all three elements of the hermeneutic and dialogic approach is that religious social critics, drawing as they do on their own traditions, can and do help democracy understand itself better, especially in response to the challenges to freedom, equality, and inclusivity which it regularly confronts. Therefore, to substantiate and illustrate my claims about American democracy, its political ethic of belief, and its relation to religion, I turn in Chapters 3 through 6 the writings and activism of four mid-twentieth century social critics: John Courtney Murray S.J.; Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel; Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; and John Dewey. In each case, I demonstrate that each critic functions as a religious social critic of American society who is responding to an Eclipse of the Public by the consciousness-raising invocation of American-democratic as well as religious signs and symbols in response to American democracy's humanistic belief-demands.

In Chapter 3, I turn to the social criticism of Fr. John Courtney Murray, S.J., and in particular, his writings and speeches that focus on American democracy, and especially *We Hold These Truths*. I show that Murray aims to revivify American's awareness of and commitment to a set of core political beliefs which he calls "the American Proposition." I demonstrate not only that Murray thinks that these political beliefs and the collective self-understanding that goes along with them has been eclipsed by forces arising from the fact of religious pluralism and the rise of a family of political and spiritual monisms. More than that, I show that Murray works to overcome this eclipse by offering his own overlapping interpretation of American-democratic and Catholic-Christian tradition: he appeals to both the historical-genealogical as well as epistemic overlap between the tradition of American democracy and the Catholic tradition of natural law. By showing the ways that Murray sets the American-democratic and Catholic traditions semiotically in conversation, I demonstrate that Murray is a "prophet of the Public" that helps us to observe and appreciate American democracy's hermeneutic and dialogic dimensions.

In Chapter 4 I turn to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s social criticism. King is perhaps the example of a prophet of the Public *par excellence*; his overlapping interpretations are certainly the most thoroughgoing, extended, and explicit. Tracing these patterns through key, illustrative examples from King's speeches and writings, I show that, in King's response to the eclipse of black and White Americans' consciousness of the dignity of black people by the myth of racial inferiority, he aims to raise Americans' consciousness of this dignity in overlapping terms: those of his Baptist and personalist brand of Christianity and those of the tradition and heritage of American democracy. I trace not only the ways that he works to make sense of American democracy's belief-requirements (or as he once famously referred to it, "its creed") in

both Protestant-Christian and American-democratic terms, but also how that he specifically and consistently identifies the point of overlap as a shared understanding of human dignity. Doing so, I demonstrate that King’s social criticism, too, provides evidence for American democracy’s hermeneutic and dialogic dimensions.

In Chapter 5, I turn to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s social criticism, specifically his politically and socially-oriented speeches and writings. Examining these texts, I demonstrate that Heschel offers his social criticism in response to an eclipse of the Public by a broad array of distinctly “modern” forces (including fascism, totalitarianism, militarism, capitalism, and various forms of positivism). Each of these forces assume, embody and/or advance an understanding of the human being as characterized by “expediency”—one that understands human beings’ primary purpose to be satisfying their own needs and desires and understands the world and its resources as a means to do so. I argue that, in response to this reductive and inhumane anthropology, Heschel draws on both Jewish and American-democratic tradition to raise Americans’ consciousness to “human being as a category of value.” By tracing Heschel’s references to the beliefs that he takes to be required by American democracy, I make clear that Heschel often references these political beliefs precisely to highlight the overlap between the American political tradition and his Jewish theology of pathos that flows out of the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. In the process, I demonstrate that Heschel’s politically and socially oriented speeches and writings provide further evidence, not only for American democracy’s political ethic of belief, but for its hermeneutic and dialogic relationship to religion.

In Chapter 6, I return to the figure of John Dewey and consider his legacy as a religious social critic. In doing so, I treat Dewey’s moral and philosophical worldview, or “humanistic naturalism,” as functioning in a similar way to the way religion does for the other critics: it

provides Dewey norms as well as signs and symbols which he to articulate his social criticism, as well as helps name the community of like-minded humanists with which Dewey was involved in much of his social action. Focusing on his statements late in his life, in the run-up to World War II, I demonstrate that Dewey responds to the threats posed to American democracy and society by the developments of the machine age by working to reinterpret and thereby reinvigorate American democracy's traditional political anthropology. He offers an account of the genealogical-historical overlap between American democracy's traditional political anthropology and that of his humanistic naturalism, in order to provide new theory of human nature that is better-suited to the current empirical conditions of the machine age and thus will be better able to inform, justify, and orient American democracy. I highlight that, in all cases, Dewey identifies the overlap between these traditions to be a humanistic axiology. By focusing on Dewey's role as a social critic, I show that Dewey's statements on American democracy and the beliefs it requires provide further evidence of the hermeneutic and dialogic relationship of democracy with, not only religious or theological traditions of belief and practice, but also other broadly philosophical, metaphysical, and moral worldviews in American society.

In the Conclusion, I offer the concept of a "public axiology" as a helpful concept for further theorizing of religion and democracy. Drawing on a Deweyan-Walzerian understanding of the term, I demonstrate four ways it helps us to appreciate key dynamics of American democracy's humanistic axiology: its nature, status, form, and function. Building on these insights, I offer five specific lessons to be drawn for theorizing the relationship between religion and democracy: that American democracy is not self-interpreting; that religion is among those philosophical, moral, and metaphysical traditions of thought and practice that are involved in helping Americans interpret and understand their political tradition; that religion has been among

those philosophical, moral, and metaphysical traditions of thought and practice that are involved in helping Americans hold each other accountable to their political obligations; that this public axiology functions as a condition of both liberty and equality within conditions of religious, philosophical, and moral pluralism; and finally, that such religious, philosophical, and moral diversity also prevents this public axiology from becoming monistic or totalitarian in a way that would compromise these key, liberal and democratic values of American democracy of liberty and equality.

Principles of Selection for Main Interlocutors: Connected and Religious Social Critics

I have chosen to focus my analysis on Murray, King, Heschel, and Dewey for three main reasons. First, each figure fits Walzer's criteria for what constitutes a social critic, specifically, a "connected critic." Each critic follows the "path of interpretation" to (re)interpret both their inherited religious/philosophical *and* political resources in light of the challenges—and specifically challenges to democracy—which they and their communities faced.³¹ In doing so, each of these critics stands slightly apart from wider society to provide a critical, reflexive interpretation of the shared meaning of our American, democratic way of life, and each of them directs that interpretation to his fellow Americans. Furthermore, to do so, each figure engages in thick description of the religious, moral, and political worlds they address, often using first-order religious language. Additionally, each critic provides interpretations of what he thinks American democracy requires Americans to believe and works to connect these beliefs with his religious/philosophical worldview. These figures' particular attention or connection to religion

³¹ Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 18-32.

plays an important role in forming their criticism and helping them to achieve the “inches” of critical distance necessary to levy their social criticism.³²

Second, each figure levies their social criticism aimed at overcoming a specific eclipse of the Public. Murray is responding to the ways in which the distinctly modern facts of religious pluralism and various totalitarian political regimes threaten American’s traditional collective self-understanding. King is responding forcefully to the eclipse of the Public by the Myth of Racial Inferiority, as King terms it, which prevents White Americans from considering Black Americans in their reflection on the consequences of combined action. And Heschel is responding to a broad set of modern forces and ideologies that imagine human beings’ purpose to be the satisfaction of her needs and desires and thus inhibits Americans’ ability to see human beings as “a category of value.” Dewey, for his part, is responding to the eclipse of the Public by the vast and rapid advancements in machine and communication technologies following the industrial revolution which rendered the consequences of combined action too great in scale and too diffuse to apprehend.

Third, not only does each critic invoke American democracy’s political ethic of belief in their response to these eclipses, but they do so to make explicit the ways in which both the tradition of American democracy *and* their respective religious or philosophical traditions require belief in a basic humanistic axiology. This feature makes the activity of these social critics excellent evidence of American democracy’s humanistic axiology and corresponding political ethic of belief, and enables me to examine its functioning and dynamics in relation to a few key religious, moral, and philosophical traditions in American society.

³² Ibid., 61.

Fourth, each interpreter represents a religious, moral, or philosophical tradition that has significant historical and current impact in American society: a Roman Catholic Christian (Murray), a Protestant Christian (King), an Orthodox Jew (Heschel) and a secular humanist (Dewey). While this selection is by no means exhaustive, this set of examples provides sufficient material to analyze and consider, both theoretically and practically, the role of American democracy's political ethic of belief in mediating between different religious and ethical traditions in the twentieth century. In addition, it includes the dominant traditions that have characterized the narratives about shared, American, public values since 1940 and have largely set the terms of such narratives ever since.

Finally, it must also be acknowledged that all of the chosen figures are male. This is the case for contingent reasons, not principled ones. There is nothing inherently gendered to the practice of religious social criticism, the appeal to American democracy's political ethic of belief, or my argument. In choosing figures for this dissertation, I looked for a set of prominent social critics from a similar historical period who were leaders in their own religious/philosophical communities during their lifetimes and also major commentators on American democracy. Thus, some of the gender-bias can be attributed to the historical and cultural gender bias of both the of the mid-century United States as well as the internal gender dynamics of the religious communities in question. Nevertheless, women engage in and have long been engaging in the kind of overlapping interpretations that characterize the religious social criticism that I consider here (Elizabeth Cady Stanton's 1892 speech before congress comes to mind).³³

³³ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Solitude of Self. Address Delivered by Mrs. Stanton before the Committee of the Judiciary of the United States Congress" (speech, Washington, D.C. January 18, 1892), National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/solitude-of-self.htm>.

Recent and Influential Approaches to Religion and American Democracy in Scholarly Literature: Deliberation, Agonism, and Prophecy

The study of religion and democracy is, unsurprisingly, interdisciplinary. Scholars working at this nexus find their academic homes in varying departments, fields of study, and thus also utilize varying and often overlapping methodologies. While one might expect the experts on religion and democracy to be working primarily in the fields of religious studies or political science, these scholars are found across disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, including anthropology, history, law, philosophy, political science, and sociology. And of course, given that both American democracy and religion are perennial topics of public interest, there is no shortage of journalistic and popular works on the topic.

The “field’s” rather helter-skelter topography makes it somewhat difficult to make general statements or trace clear-cut trends in the literature. Nevertheless, surveying recent and influential literature that theorizes the relation of religion and democracy in the United States, I am struck by three phenomena: the popularity of “deliberative” understandings of democracy, the response by proponents of “agonistic” conceptions of democracy, and the recent rise of “prophecy” as a popular framework that aims to integrate some of the insights of the deliberative and agonistic models. I will now briefly examine key examples of each trend, noting their shortcomings for making sense of the religious social criticism which is the object of this study, before discussing the merits of my own approach.

Deliberation

The first approach I will consider, and the one that dominates the literature on the proper relationship between religion and democracy, is a school of thought generally referred to as

“deliberative democracy.” Theories of deliberative democracy offer a broadly proceduralist, rationalist, cognitivist, and consensus-based approach to democratic legitimation based in one or another notion of public justification. These theories gained popularity starting in the 1990s, which has carried well into the new millennium.

Advocates of this approach maintain that, as the name suggests, deliberation is a necessary condition for the legitimacy of democratic political outcomes and arrangements. On this picture, citizens must publicly justify a proposal for its adoption to be democratically legitimate; they must advance and consider different claims about what will secure the common good. In doing so, citizens use reasons to explain and justify proposed courses of action in the effort to reach some kind of agreement or consensus. Thus, for deliberative democrats, this public exchange of such reasons becomes tantamount to democratic legitimation: the deliberation entailed in such a process of reason-exchange, reason-evaluation, and ultimately collective decision-making justifies an outcome or arrangement as sufficiently democratic. This approach to democracy has led to famously vehement debate about the justifiability of, in particular, the expression of religious reasons or ideas, in the democratic public square.³⁴

John Rawls and Deliberative Democracy

As early and important contributors to these ideas, John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas loom large in this literature, though there are many prominent, contemporary deliberative democrats, including Joshua Cohen, Amy Gutmann, Dennis Thompson, and Seyla Benhabib. However, the work of political philosopher John Rawls provides by far the most influential analysis of the proper relation between liberal democracy’s values and diverse religious, moral,

³⁴ For a recent example, see Aurelia Bardón, “Religious Arguments and Public Justification,” in *Religion, Secularism, and Constitutional Democracy* ed. Jean L. Cohen and Cécile Laborde, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 273-292.

and philosophical traditions in a liberal democratic society. In particular, Rawls's theories of an "overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines" and of "public reason" have set the terms for much of the debate about religious, moral, and philosophical pluralism in liberal democratic political theory since the 1993 publication of his *Political Liberalism*.³⁵ Because of this legacy and also because my project is influenced by Rawls' solution to the challenges posed by moral, religious, and philosophical pluralism, a brief consideration of Rawls position proves instructive for not only making clear the basic shortcomings of a deliberative democrats' approach to the relationship between democratic values and religions, but also for illuminating my own project.

It is important to begin with a disclaimer about Rawls's thinking on the relationship between religion and politics: it changed. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance not only to primarily attend to his later statements on the subject (starting with the publication of *Political Liberalism*) but also, to the degree that one needs to reference his earlier, famous work, *A Theory of Justice* (the parts of which Rawls says are still relevant after publishing *Political Liberalism*) that one does so by reading it through the lens of *Political Liberalism*, and not vice versa.

To briefly summarize this shift in his thinking: in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls aims to reconcile the democratic and liberal values of liberty and equality by offering a theory of justice as fairness that is meant to apply to the "basic structure" of a well-organized society. In the course of doing so, Rawls originally renders the picture of justice as fairness "stable" by—providing an account of why citizens ought to be willing to abide by it—by appealing to a Kantian philosophical anthropology. He claims that citizens will come to see that the principles of justice as fairness pursue their own good as free and autonomous persons, and will therefore

³⁵ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, exp. ed., (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

eventually also develop a desire to act in accordance with them.³⁶ Thus, one need not make recourse to anything beyond such a philosophical anthropology to find Rawls's principles of justice intelligible, understand why they are important, and be motivated to hold them; one only need to "buy in" to this theory of human nature. However, Rawls was soundly critiqued for this move on the grounds that it builds in one particular, comprehensive understanding of the human good, and he eventually finds it too illiberal and inhospitable to the religious, philosophical, and moral pluralism found in many democratic societies.³⁷ Therefore, he developed a different approach to securing the stability of this conception of justice, which he outlines in *Political Liberalism*.

In that text, Rawls rejects the original method of stabilizing the principles by appealing to a Kantian "comprehensive doctrine" (and Part III of *Theory*).³⁸ Indeed, Rawls states at the outset of *Political Liberalism* that this is the problem he will address: "the problem of political liberalism is: How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines? Put another way: How is it possible that deeply opposed though reasonable comprehensive doctrines may live together and affirm the political conception of a constitutional regime?"³⁹ This is why, in *Political Liberalism*, Rawls explicitly aims to reimagine the piece of *Theory* that is designed to provide the same principles the needed stability.

³⁶ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).

³⁷ See Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³⁸ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xv-xvi

³⁹ *Ibid.*, xviii.

To accomplish this aim, Rawls scales back the “comprehensiveness” of the notion of justice-as-fairness and argues that it should be understood as merely a less-than-comprehensive, “freestanding,” political conception of justice. Furthermore, Rawls suggests that, instead of relying on such a comprehensive, Kantian philosophical anthropology to arrive at justice-as-fairness and render it stable in a society characterized by pluralism, we ought to arrive at a freestanding political conception of justice *hermeneutically*, by interpreting the fundamental ideas implicit in our society’s public political culture.⁴⁰ On my reading, Rawls suggests that the most fundamental ideas in the public political culture are freedom (citizens are free), equality (citizens are equal), and fairness (society is a fair system of cooperation).⁴¹

Beginning in this way, Rawls argues that citizens in a liberal democracy can be reasonably expected to endorse this scaled-back, “freestanding,” political conception of justice—without sacrificing individual liberty or equality, and despite religious, moral, and philosophical pluralism—for three reasons. The first is the reason already mentioned: the political conception of justice is implicit in the publicly available, shared political tradition of which we find ourselves a part. Second, citizens endorse this political conception from the point of view of their own “comprehensive doctrines” or worldviews via an “overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines,” and thus with the support of their own comprehensive religious, philosophical and/or moral worldviews. Third, citizens must justify their political decisions to one another by—in due course and only on constitutional essentials—translating their comprehensive views into the language of “public reason,” providing reasons that other free and equal citizens may be reasonably expected to accept. These three dimensions of Rawls’s argument—the public political culture, overlapping consensus, and public reason are particularly

⁴⁰ Ibid., 100-101.

⁴¹ Ibid., 8, 14, 43, 175.

significant for theorizing the relationship between religion and democracy in Rawls's deliberative framework.

By focusing on the second and third elements, one observes the particular way that Rawls's deliberative picture of democracy affects how he builds religion into his theory and structures its relationship to liberal democracy and its values. It becomes clear that Rawls incorporates religion into his theory by imagining the religious, philosophical, and moral traditions in society *through* the lens of deliberation: they are both sources of motivation to deliberate and a fund of resources or "reasons" for either endorsing or rejecting the political conception of justice. That is to say, they provide material and motivation for reaching a consensus with one's compatriots.

However, Rawls's method of treating "comprehensive doctrines" as providing motivation to deliberate and resources for the kind of deliberation that will inform an overlapping consensus on the political conception of justice raises another challenge for his deliberative picture of democracy. Paradoxically, while religion and the related "comprehensive doctrines" serve as an inspiration to and resource for deliberation, because there is diversity among them, they also serve as a barrier to effective deliberation in Rawls's theory. If democratic legitimacy depends on the public justification of proposals by free and equal citizens exchanging reasons and reaching a consensus, then Rawls has made that process of reason-exchange more difficult, if not impossible, by suggesting that citizens do and ought to rely on their more comprehensive worldviews to provide them reasons to endorse the political conception of justice. Indeed, it is unclear how citizens could effectively deliberate about basic matters of justice from the point of view of multiple comprehensive frameworks which are not shared *at all*.

Therefore, Rawls needs his theory of “public reason” to make deliberation under these conditions possible and resolve the tension between the conflicting roles that these “comprehensive doctrines” play in his theory.⁴² This is why he requires that—in due course and only on matters of constitutional essentials—reasonable citizens translate their more comprehensive reasons for supporting a particular proposed arrangement into the language and framework of the political conception of justice, one which other free and equal citizens may be reasonably expected to endorse. Indeed, Rawls explicitly states that exercising public reason consists in deliberating within this framework, stipulating that: “a citizen engages in public reason, then, when he or she deliberates within a framework of what he or she sincerely regards as the most reasonable political conception of justice, a conception that expresses political values that others, as free and equal citizens might also reasonably be expected reasonably to endorse.”⁴³ These “comprehensive doctrines” provide both the impetus and the material for such deliberation, yet also a potential barrier to it. In both cases, Rawls imagines the relationship between “comprehensive doctrines” and democracy in terms of their relationship to the process of deliberation.

Because of this focus on the deliberative dimensions of democracy, Rawls fails to fully account for the dimensions of the relationship between democracy religious, moral, and philosophical traditions which I aim to draw out in this dissertation: those that are hermeneutic and dialogic. As I will demonstrate, the point(s) of overlap between American democracy’s normative dimensions and those of the various religious traditions in American society does not necessarily take the form of a rationally-ground consensus of reasonable citizens and its contents

⁴² For Rawls’s endorsement of deliberative democracy and its close relationship to public reason, see *Political Liberalism*, 447-450.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 450.

is nothing so specific as a political conception of justice. Rather, the religious social critics in question help us to see that the overlap that exists is hermeneutic and dialogic, emerging in and through the act of interpretation of multiple traditions of thought and practice. They help us to see that the overlap comes about and is perpetuated through the practice of making sense of shared meanings in terms that are not shared by all.⁴⁴ Thus, the “consensus” is better understood, not so much a rationally-grounded consensus on a political conception of justice, as a set of shared understandings that can be and is made sense of in diverse terms (many of which are religious), and that rely on such (ongoing) interpretation to be made both explicit and intelligible to diverse Americans in a religiously plural society.

This oversight is all the more puzzling because it is clear that the practices of reasoning which underlie Rawls’s theory of public reason and similar theories are practices which themselves presuppose and rely on interpretation.⁴⁵ The practice of moving “from premises to conclusions, examining and reconsidering (and helping one another to examine and reconsider) premises and arguments in discussing and debating matters in the public square” as well as articulating the kind of “public reasons” that Rawls has in mind are all activities that involve various kinds of interpretation: interpreting various empirical matters, interpreting the premises themselves, as well as all manner of relevant and authoritative texts, teachings, laws, and traditions, interpreting one’s own relationship to them, as well as the crucial interpretation of oneself and those political and social others who are involved in the situation. And this is probably a short list.

⁴⁴ At certain points this dynamic seems to be *implied* by Rawls’s theory, though perhaps not endorsed.

⁴⁵ For example, see Jeffrey Stout’s discussion of democracy as a “social practice” in *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

My basic concern with this strain of thinking about democracy and how it influences the way we think about democracy's relationship to the various moral, religious, and philosophical traditions in a pluralistic society is that it begins too far downstream. Hoping to find the site of contact between religion and democracy in the world of rationality and/or the discursive practices of reason-giving, it fails to adequately consider the non-rational and/or pre-rational sites at which religion and democracy may *already* be related. However, if religion and democracy may be (and, in fact, are) hermeneutically related before the reasoning they mention has even begun, such relation may in fact inform our reasoning as well as our reason-giving. Indeed, I want to suggest that there are important pre-rational and non-rational ways that we relate religion and democracy *as* we make sense of the world and our place in it. The examples of the examined religious social critics' overlapping interpretations suggest that religion and democracy stand in a dialogic and hermeneutic relation even as we form our premises, let alone reason to our conclusions, or articulate either of them.

This myopia notwithstanding, there are two decidedly non-deliberative dimensions of Rawls's approach to relating religion to democracy that I find evocative, and that directly inspire my approach. The first is Rawls's hermeneutic and empirical turn in *Political Liberalism*. As mentioned above, Rawls's makes a hermeneutic and empirical turn to the fundamental ideas shared in the "public political culture of democracy" in his search for a new justificatory framework for his political conception of justice. In doing so, Rawls's starting point to his approach to political justification and stability in *Political Liberalism* assumes that the democratic tradition is an important source of normativity in a democratic society. And, even more than that, in doing so, Rawls is engaged in interpreting the beliefs he takes to be required by American democracy itself (citizens are equal, citizens are free, and society is a fair system of

cooperation). In this aspect of his project, Rawls's takes seriously the question about what ideas, beliefs, and values the democratic political tradition requires of its members, and he works to excavate those ideas, beliefs, and values from the "public political culture" as it, in fact, exists. It is then on the basis of these beliefs that he constructs and justifies a political conception of justice. While this hermeneutic dimension of Rawls's project is too often overlooked, it is compelling in its inductive, empirical, and hermeneutical approach to identifying American democracy's normative dimensions. This approach resonates broadly with the hermeneutic and empirical approach I adopt in this project.

The second dimension of Rawls's project which is evocative and resonant with my own approach is his recognition that whatever is shared in a pluralistic democracy must be made sense of in diverse terms. Rawls's theory of overlapping consensus suggests the importance of citizen's ability to find reasons within their own comprehensive doctrines to endorse the political conception of justice that is constructed from the values found in democracy's public political culture. In fact, Rawls finds the connection to citizens' comprehensive doctrines so important for the stability of such a society that he makes it structural to his theory. In doing so, Rawls's theory of overlapping consensus itself suggests a more hermeneutic and dialogic picture than Rawls seems to acknowledge: it bakes-in the importance of a pluralistic way of justifying democracy's values, one which suggests that these values are in a certain kind of conversation with our various comprehensive doctrines (even if the citizens who will choose to participate in that conversation will only be the "reasonable" ones, that subset of citizens who believe that their comprehensive views ought not to be imposed on others). As such, I would also add that Rawls's idea of an overlapping consensus itself suggests that democracy's values must not only be able to be justified in diverse terms, but at a more basic level, interpreted and made sense of in terms of

the diverse frameworks of our comprehensive doctrines. In this way, it resonates with my claim that democracy's axiology must be made sense of in diverse terms and that religion plays an important role in doing so.

The above critiques notwithstanding, it is clear that democratic culture, practice, and institutions unquestionably involve deliberative practices, norms, and traditions, and religion undoubtedly informs such deliberation. However, I am unconvinced that a deliberative approach to democratic theory offers the best framework for capturing the role that religious, philosophical, and moral traditions of thought and practice play in imagining democracy's normative dimensions and possible justifications. Indeed, though Rawls's picture goes further than others to recognize important aspects of these relationships, I worry that the dominance of deliberative conceptions of democracy obscures a key site of hermeneutic overlap between American democracy and religion as well as the dialogic dynamic that characterizes it.

Agonism

Another approach to the relationship of religion and democracy can be described as an "agonistic" approach, and it has developed more recently, largely in response to such theories of "deliberative democracy." This approach is sometimes referred to as "agonistic pluralism" or "agonistic democracy."⁴⁶ In each case, agonistic approaches to democracy reject deliberative democrats' emphasis on processes of deliberation designed to reach a reasoned consensus among diverse parties. Indeed, they reject the notion that any kind of broad consensus is desirable in a political arrangement calling itself democratic, because such a consensus would eliminate the conflict and contestation that they believe is constitutive of democracy itself. Agonists begin by

⁴⁶ Prominent agonistic pluralists include William E. Connolly, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe.

imagining democracy as populated by groups with goals and interests who exercise power, force, violence, and passion to achieve their aims. Thus, these groups thus find themselves in contest with each other. Agonists argue that democracy is an arrangement that does not try to eliminate this conflict, but rather transforms it in a particular way. Namely, they suggest that democracy does and ought to structure this conflict in a way that helps guide the expressions of these collective and individual passions toward democratic ends, by transforming “enemies” (who are to be destroyed) into “adversaries” (who have a certain standing and rights, including the right to exist, despite their differences). Democracy’s job, understood this way, is thus to transform “antagonistic” sentiments into “agonistic” ones.

Chantal Mouffe’s Agonistic Pluralism

The Belgian political theorist, Chantal Mouffe, is perhaps the most well-known agonist, and her theory of “agonistic pluralism” is illustrative on these points. Furthermore, as we will see below, her thinking has influenced scholars of American democracy and religion. For these reasons, she serves as a helpful interlocutor for examining how an agonistic approach to democracy may or may not help us think about the beliefs required by the tradition of American democracy.

Mouffe interprets contemporary liberal-democratic politics as the inheritor of the two distinct traditions for which is named: liberalism and democracy. She argues that, because the liberal-democratic tradition combines elements of both, democracy itself must be understood in terms of the “paradox” that arises from the tension that is typically described as the tension between liberty and equality. This paradox Mouffe describes as a tension between the liberal tradition, which emphasizes freedom, and the rule of law, and individual rights, and the

democratic tradition which emphasizes equality and popular sovereignty.⁴⁷ She argues that democratic theory must appreciate this tension and its implications: “it is vital for democratic politics to understand that liberal democracy results from the articulation of two logics which are incompatible in the last instance and there is no way that they could be perfectly reconciled.”⁴⁸ Appreciating this fact, Mouffe reasons, leads us away from the deliberative model, which is obsessed with finding “a dangerous utopia of reconciliation” via some kind of consensus. Mouffe suggests that such consensus is dangerous because it rids democracy of the productive tension involved in its constitutive paradox, thus surrendering both its character as well as the productive struggles that constitute it.⁴⁹

Such a contest-based understanding of democracy, Mouffe names “agonistic pluralism.” According to this picture, “the aim of democratic politics is to construct the ‘them’ in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed but as an ‘adversary’, that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question.”⁵⁰ It is, as she puts it, “to transform antagonism into agonism.”⁵¹ Mouffe, drawing on broadly Wittgensteinian ideas, argues that this mental, social, and political transformation—from perceiving the political other as an enemy to perceiving them as an adversary—can be accomplished “not by providing arguments about the rationality embodied in liberal-democratic institutions” as the deliberative democrats suggest, but rather “by multiplying the institutions, the discourses, the forms of life that foster identification with democratic values.”⁵² Indeed, what makes an adversary out of an enemy is the fact that both parties “have a shared adhesion to the

⁴⁷ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London; New York: Verso, 2000), 2-3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 96.

ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality.”⁵³ Therefore, the practices that inculcate and encourage such adhesion will facilitate the agonism which Mouffe finds so desirable and democratic.

Despite her endorsement of such democratic ideals or values or “principles,” Mouffe is clear that she is not endorsing a “consensus” around shared values such as the deliberative democrats imagine. Instead, she says that she endorses a “conflictual consensus.” She agrees:

with those who affirm that a pluralist democracy demands a certain amount of consensus and that it requires allegiance to the values which constitute its ‘ethico-political principles’. But since those ethico-political principles can only exist through many different and conflicting interpretations, such a consensus is bound to be a ‘conflictual consensus’. This is indeed the privileged terrain of agonistic confrontation among adversaries.⁵⁴

Here Mouffe’s agonism appears very much in line with my own proposal. She recognizes that whatever shared, political values there may be, these values are subject to constant, ongoing, and conflictual interpretations. Indeed, at precisely this point her theory suggests the hermeneutic and dialogic dimension of democracy which I hope to bring out: the way the social meanings shared by all can and do relate to those which are not shared by all. In her picture, they relate conflictually, though adversarially rather than agonistically. However, she does not pause to consider these dynamics, seemingly satisfied to note that the fact of an ongoing diversity of available interpretations supports her claim in favor of a conflictual consensus.

However, Mouffe thinks that these conflicting interpretations are political interpretations, provided by some kind of political leader, party, or organization and seems to have trouble imagining how religion would fit into her agonistic picture at all. Mouffe writes that the conflicting interpretations that she has in mind will “correspond to the different interpretations of

⁵³ Ibid., 102.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 103.

the ethico-political principles: liberal-conservative, social-democratic, neo-liberal, radical democratic and so on. Each of them proposes its own interpretation of the ‘common good’, and tries to implement a different form of hegemony.”⁵⁵ So far, it sounds like these interpretations could be offered by religionists or religious leaders just as easily as politicians, citizens, and political parties. Yet, Mouffe goes on to suggest that other, non-political forms of collective identification are dangerous and corrosive to this political arrangement: She writes that, “a well-functioning democracy calls for a vibrant clash of democratic *political* positions. If this is missing there is the danger that this democratic confrontation will be replaced by a confrontation among other forms of collective identification, as is the case with identity politics.”⁵⁶ Thus, it appears that, in Mouffe’s theory, other moral, philosophical, and religious traditions are imagined as decidedly non-political, and indeed a threat to the proper functioning of the contest between “political positions” that constitutes democracy on her agonistic picture. She appears to imagine these conflicts as being somehow purely political contests that are free from the influence of “identity politics,” and one would have to assume, the influence of religious identity, too. In any event, it would be helpful to know exactly how Mouffe imagines religion fitting in and, if it threatens the kind of conflictual consensus that democratic politics can provide, it would be helpful to know why this is so.

This is especially the case in light of Mouffe’s emphasis on democratic practices as well as her semiotic understanding of antagonism and antagonism. Regarding the first aspect of her theory, in her endorsement of a Wittgensteinian approach to political theory, Mouffe asserts that:

The creation of democratic forms of individuality is a question of *identification* with democratic values, and this is a complex process that takes place through a manifold of practices, discourses, and language games. A Wittgensteinian approach in political theory

⁵⁵ Ibid., 104.

⁵⁶ Ibid., emphasis added.

could play an important role in the fostering of democratic values because it allows us to grasp the conditions of emergence of a democratic form of consensus.⁵⁷

Yet, if such a diversity of practices, discourses, and language games serve as conditions of possibility for democracy as such, including any consensus (contested or not) around its key beliefs, would not the moral, religious, and philosophical traditions in the given society be involved in those practices, discourses, and language games? In this way, Mouffe's emphasis on practices that make possible one's attachment to democracy's "ethico-political principles" simply begs the question regarding religion.

This question-begging dimension of her theory is only underscored when one considers precisely how Mouffe defines an enemy and adversary. She does so semiotically, defining the distinction in terms of "shared symbolic space:"

I propose to distinguish between two forms of antagonism, antagonism proper – which takes place between enemies, that is, persons who have no common symbolic space – and what I call 'agonism', which is a different mode of manifestation of antagonism because it involves a relation not between enemies but between 'adversaries', adversaries being defined in a paradoxical way as 'friendly enemies', that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space, but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way.⁵⁸

I find the idea that an adversary might be distinguished from an enemy by considering the degree to which the political other shares a common symbolic space or framework to be evocative and resonant with my own emphasis on the semiotic relationship between religion and democracy. Nevertheless, given that religious, philosophical, and moral traditions are, among other things, storehouses of symbols and thus rich symbolic spaces in and of themselves, Mouffe's theory would be strengthened by addressing what she imagines the specific roles of these traditions are in determining these relationships.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 70.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 13.

All in all, Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism helps us to think past some of the limits of the deliberative model. It helps us think about democracy as an argument or negotiation between empowered collectives over varying interpretations of democracy’s basic beliefs, principles, and values, and it goes some way towards recognizing the semiotic and hermeneutic dimensions of both religious and democratic traditions. Nevertheless, as I suggested, it could do more to excavate these hermeneutic dimensions, particularly as they involve religious, philosophical, and moral traditions, and better account for the ways in which the “agonism” imagined is not *merely* conflictual, but also conversational or dialogic.

Robert Wuthnow’s Agonistic Religious Practice

While Mouffe fails to address religion in her own analysis in *The Democratic Paradox*, Robert Wuthnow’s recent study, *Why Religion Is Good for American Democracy*, applies Mouffe’s agonistic framework to the history of religious activism in the United States. Thus, Wuthnow gives us an idea what Mouffe’s framework might look like when applied more intentionally to both religion and American democracy.

Drawing on Mouffe’s theory, Wuthnow frames the history of religious activism in the United States in terms of “agonistic religious practice” which he describes as:

a collection of religious practices that are genuinely diverse insofar as they include differing values, theologies, traditions, groups, and styles of worship that conflict with one another, rather than merely coexisting as proponents of tolerance, and that at the same time accept the right of rivals to contend energetically for their beliefs and values.⁵⁹

In his analysis, Wuthnow moves through a broad sweep of the twentieth and early twenty-first century. Starting with religious advocacy in the 1930s around the New Deal, religious activists’

⁵⁹ Robert Wuthnow, *Why Religion is Good for American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 256.

contributions to debates about liberty of conscience surrounding the issues of pacifism and conscientious objection in the 1940s, and the issue of freedom of assembly in the 1950s, Wuthnow then turns to examine religious activism on the issues of welfare, inclusion, and economic inequality that characterized the latter half of the twentieth century, before ending with a chapter on health, wellness and the recent global pandemic. He concludes that, across the sweep of this history, “agonistic religious practices...is an apt description of how public religion in the United States functions much of the time.”⁶⁰

Wuthnow’s historical analysis goes some way toward addressing the lacuna regarding religion in Mouffe’s agonistic framework. Taking aim at those who hold the overly-simple view that increasingly aligns religious affiliation with party affiliation, he argues that the practices which religion contributes that are *good* for democracy are those that facilitate and/or contribute to debate/contestation over normative claims about what is right and good, thus leading to critical-thinking and debate about normative questions, rather than mindless party-line-towing.

He writes:

If democracy is understood to be the practice through which contention is negotiated, religion’s diverse, competing, dissenting, and sometimes divisive claims are best understood as part of the practice through which democracy reinvents itself. Religious organizations’ role in this context is manifestly different from that of legislative bodies, the courts, political parties, science, and the press, partly because it sometimes speaks with divine authority, but also because it brings to the table alternative epistemic claims, visions, and possibilities that are rooted in moral precepts. Religious practices’ influence in a democracy lies not in coercion but in articulating claims and counterclaims about what is right and good. Democracy benefits when these claims are voiced from diverse quarters, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in sharp disagreement. The benefit is present even when claims are asserted dogmatically because religious diversity ensures that rebuttals and alternative claims are also voiced. We are protected from a religious establishment not only by the First Amendment but also by the disunity of religion itself. This disunity powerfully deters religious groups from speaking with one voice. At the same time, disunity facilitates the vigorous questioning of entrenched assumptions and the airing of alternative visions of the good.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ibid., 257.

⁶¹ Ibid., 17-18.

Wuthnow's analysis suggests that, on an agonistic picture, democracy benefits from the normative diversity in society that religious diversity provides because, as a source of normative "claims and counterclaims" about the good, it spurs Americans to engage in critical reflection about what they take to be good and just and to debate these things with each other. As he puts it:

Over the past century, religious groups and their leaders have contributed to American democracy in these ways, not in spite of their diversity but because of it. People have been propelled into action because they vehemently disagreed with one another. They were forced to contend with their disagreements, seeking and sometimes finding common ground, but in the process posing the hard questions about who we want to be, what our values should be, and how to get along with those who see things differently.⁶²

So, Wuthnow reasons: religious diversity is good for American democracy because without it, there would be no real material for or motivation to engage in agonistic contests with our compatriots. And it is this agonism that is the defining feature of democracy, after all.

I think Wuthnow does an admirable job making sense of how Mouffe and the agonistic democrats' ideas can be fruitfully applied to the relationship between religion and American democracy. Certainly, their joint insistence on the irreducibility of religious diversity, as well as a certain contestation that arises from such diversity within and outside of religious traditions, makes sense given the reality of American religious pluralism. One major advantage of such an agonistic approach is that it refuses to let us paper over these differences within and between religious traditions with a too-easy focus on consensus or shared values.

Yet, I wonder if both Wuthnow (and perhaps to a lesser extent Mouffe) are susceptible to the same criticism as the deliberative democrats: their agonistic approach imagines religion instrumentally—as not motivation to and material for deliberation but—as motivation to and material for agonism. And while I do not doubt that the religious, philosophical, and moral

⁶² Ibid., 6.

traditions in American society do function as motivation and material for both deliberation and agonistic power-politics *some* of the time, I still remain unconvinced that this understanding of religion is the most helpful model for relating religion and democracy.

Indeed, such a focus on deliberative and agonistic democratic theory helps us to see that there is an important dimension of democracy's internal dynamics as well as its justifications in addition to reason-giving and power-struggle: namely, interpretation. As I have been suggesting throughout, it seems that both deliberation and agonism (even antagonism) are the beneficiaries of interpretation prior to any deliberation or agonistic power-contests. Indeed, each form of democratic engagement and corresponding theory of democracy either *implies* or *takes for granted* the hermeneutic nature of the relationship between democracy's axiology and the moral, religious, and philosophical traditions in a democratic society: that these shared meanings rely on interpretation in terms that are not shared by all. However, reading the relationship between democracy and religion either through the lens of deliberation or through the lens of agonism, as they do, limits one's ability to focus-in on the specific dynamics of this interpretation and think about its broader significance for democratic theory.

Prophecy

Can the model of the Biblical prophets help us theoretically and/or practically capture this hermeneutic and dialogic dimensions of the relationship between religion and democracy? Many scholars seem to think so of late. Indeed, there is a recent turn to prophecy in the literature that relates religion to American democracy, and one which I judge to be a step in the right direction. Much of it resonates with and informs my approach in this project. This is the case because, in general, it is an approach which more robustly accounts for the dynamics of

interpretation and their place at the nexus of religion and democracy—those features which I aim to highlight. Scholars who adopt this approach generally do so by focusing on the statements of various individuals engaging in “prophetic” speech and action and/or drawing on “prophetic” discourse.

This prophetic approach has appeared in recent years in scholars’ analyses of the relationship between religion and American democracy across various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Albert J. Raboteau’s 2016 book, *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and their Struggle for Social and Political Justice*, adopts a historical and biographical approach. He uses the lens of “prophecy” to structure his account of the way that the religious figures in question critiqued the status quo and advocated for greater justice in the United States.⁶³ Ruth Braunstein’s 2017 monograph, *Prophets and Patriots: Faith in Democracy Across the Political Divide* approaches the relationship between religion and democracy sociologically and ethnographically.⁶⁴ Based on fieldwork that Braunstein conducted among two civil-society groups of citizen-activists during the years of the Obama administration, the book contrasts a group of progressive, interfaith activists’ self-understanding as carrying on a Biblical, prophetic tradition of social critique, with a conservative tea party’s corresponding self-understanding as carrying on an American, patriotic tradition. Journalist Jack Jenkins’ 2020 book, *American Prophets: The Religious Roots of Progressive Politics and the Ongoing Fight For the Soul of the Country* similarly uses the framework of biblical prophecy to make sense of the “re-emergence” of progressive faith-based activism and its contributions to and engagement

⁶³ Albert J. Raboteau, *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁶⁴ Ruth Braunstein, *Prophets and Patriots: Faith in Democracy Across the Political Divide* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

with American politics.⁶⁵ And, while these three recent examples use the framework of Biblical prophecy primarily to make sense of progressive religious individuals and movements, Cathleen Kaveny, in her examination of the American jeremiad and rhetoric of prophetic indictment, applies the prophetic framework to rhetorical engagement from groups and individuals across the political spectrum.⁶⁶

Cathleen Kaveny's Deliberation-Indictment Dialectic

Kaveny most explicitly theorizes the dynamics which are my interest here, and thus bears sustained attention as a representative of this approach. The main intervention she offers focuses on the form of discourse which has informed scholars' thinking about the relationship between religion and politics in the public square. Kaveny, too, takes issue with any overly-deliberative imagining the relationship between religion and democracy, despite herself ultimately endorsing a deliberative picture. Specifically, she critiques views that miss an important form of rhetoric used by of religion and religionists in debates about matters of public consequence: the rhetoric of prophetic indictment, arguing that "a full grasp of the nature, function, and limits of religious discourse in the American public square requires coming to terms with the rhetoric of prophetic indictment."⁶⁷ This is because of Kaveny's conviction that "form follows function in political discourse," and therefore, "to understand the role of religion in the American public square, it is essential to come to terms with the important and continuing role played by the jeremiad, which

⁶⁵ Jack Jenkins, *American Prophets: The Religious Roots of Progressive Politics and the Ongoing Fight for the Soul of the Country* (New York: HarperOne an imprint of Harper Collins Publishing, 2020). It should be noted that at the start of this chapter, I noted the rarity of two books being published with identical titles in the same decade. Raboteau's and Jenkin's were published four years apart and also share the same title, though, they were not technically published in the same decade. Nevertheless, both cases speak to the popularity not only of debates about American's political beliefs, but the appeal of a "prophetic" framework for thinking about the relationship between religion and politics in the United States.

⁶⁶ Cathleen Kaveny, *Prophecy Without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

operates like a legal indictment,” and not like deliberative rhetoric.⁶⁸ Examining this form of discourse helps us to see that Biblical religion has contributed to American social and political culture a form of engagement between religion and politics that is not well captured by the deliberative model.

This disambiguation helps Kaveny diagnose what is problematic in the contemporary state of affairs in broader American public discourse. By tracing a history and recent topography of the use of the jeremiad in American public life, Kaveny hopes to show that many of the “clashes” and “culture wars” that characterize recent public discourse (particularly regarding disagreements between adherents of the same religious tradition) stem from a conflict between the two forms of discourse mentioned above: moral deliberation and prophetic indictment. She writes that:

My hypothesis is that some of these clashes, and some of these ensuing breakdowns, are not precipitated by factual disputes or by the application of mutually inconsistent moral premises. Instead, they are driven by clashes in moral sensibility, which in turn shapes and reflects clashes in choice of moral discourse. More specifically, I believe they are driven by tensions between a prophetic and a deliberative style of discourse—between prophetic indictment and moral deliberation.⁶⁹

This focus on the conflicting forms of discourse helps Kaveny demonstrate the ways in which the apparent disagreements that she has in mind are not substantive, but rather result from a misalignment in moral sensibility and the resulting choice of moral discourse to use to engage on the topic. Doing so, she hopes to draw attention away from the overly facile idea that Americans are engaged in interminable moral debates, and focus attention on the question of the appropriate use of each of these kinds of discourse. In this way, she hopes to contribute to a recalibration of these discourses in American public life.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 242.

Kaveny does so in two steps. First, she argues that the rhetorical strategies of moral deliberation and prophetic indictment ought to be related dialectically in the context of a political community, with moral deliberation being the “normal mode of moral reasoning” and prophetic discourse being an “episodic form of discourse,” appropriate only in emergencies.⁷⁰ Indeed, she describes the role of prophetic indictment to be akin to a “*moral chemotherapy*, a reaction to potentially life-threatening distortion in ordinary, day-to-day moral discussion.”⁷¹ It is a treatment that disrupts normal discourse with a different form of discourse, one that while existentially threatening the ordinary form of discourse in the short-term, if used sparingly, will actually restore the very possibility of ordinary, deliberative discourse.⁷²

In the second step, Kaveny outlines an “ethic of prophetic rhetoric” to guide us about when and how to use prophetic rhetoric in the public square. Kaveny imagines such indictment to be a certain kind of rhetorical warfare and therefore she borrows liberally from the tradition of just war theory to offer a “just prophecy theory” as a guide regarding the conditions which must be satisfied in order for one to be justified in using prophetic rhetoric.⁷³ And in the final chapter, she draws on the prophetic exemplars of Jonah, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr. to add that, when it is justified, such prophetic indictment must be tempered by a sense of irony and the virtue of humility. Ultimately, it must be just and compassionate indictment, prophecy *without* contempt.⁷⁴

As I suggested above, I believe that Kaveny’s approach is sounder and comes closer than the deliberative and agonistic democrats to capturing the dynamics present in the religious social

⁷⁰ Ibid., 252.

⁷¹ Ibid., 287.

⁷² Ibid, 287-288.

⁷³ Ibid., Chapter 8.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 418.

critics' overlapping interpretations that are my focus. In my view, her approach represents an admirable and evocative attempt to synthesize both the deliberative and agonistic dimensions of democracy into the dialectic I described above: what I call a deliberation-indictment dialectic. It is attractive in its ability to capture, to at least a degree, the way that religionists invoke first-order religious signs and symbols in their efforts to articulate their critical and constructive visions for American society. However, in the end, it still fails to fully capture the overlapping nature of the religious social critics' "prophetic indictments" that I consider in this dissertation, focusing on the function of those meanings and symbols which are *not* shared in American public life at the expense of a consideration of the ways which shared and unshared meanings are actively and dynamically in relation.

I believe that this is the case because her approach is vulnerable to the same critique as that of the deliberative democrats: she imagines religion's relation to democracy through the lens of deliberation, namely, how its rhetorical function serves the deliberative process. Though she admits that this part of her argument will require full exposition in a future book, she clearly states her hypothesis about the dialectic relationship between deliberation and indictment in the final pages of *Prophecy Without Contempt*:

Here is my own hypothesis, which will require another book to develop and demonstrate. What I have called the language of practical deliberation is the ordinary discourse of public morality, social policy, and law. Participants in public discussions reason from fundamental premises to conclusions and offer nuanced assessments of actions, policies, and consequences. They often immerse themselves in the detailed language of case law, regulations, and white papers. What happens, however, when practical deliberation goes off the rails—when it tacitly or explicitly betrays the fundamental commitments that serve as its only sound basis?

Here, I think, the outraged rhetoric of prophetic indictment plays its rightful role—its powerful and bitter medicine is meant to wake deliberators from their moral coma and revive their commitment to the true foundational principles of the community. *Prophecy without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square* has shown how

prophetic rhetoric can operate as an important corrective to practical deliberation that has become corrupted because it has lost its connection to fundamental commitments.⁷⁵

Here Kaveny clearly reads the function of religions' and religionists' prophetic indictments through the lens of an ultimately deliberative understanding of democracy. She argues that such religiously inspired speech should only be used in order to re-start the process of deliberation when it has stalled. In this way, prophetic indictment represents a qualitatively different form of discourse that, nevertheless, serves the end of a fundamentally deliberative picture of democracy. Deliberation and indictment are related dialectically, but deliberation is the more fundamentally important and democratic side of the dialectic for Kaveny. Indictment is called for only in state of emergency. Deliberation represents democracy-as-usual.

In contrast, I take the statements of the religious social critics considered in what follows to be both ordinary and usual. What is more, I also take them to be fundamental. In contrast to what Kaveny seems to suggest, these social critics' overlapping interpretations are not a barrier to either deliberation or indictment: they are their starting point for both.

A Hermeneutic and Dialogic Approach to Religion and Democracy

In what follows, I will argue that we need a theory of democracy that can fully account for the significance of Murray's, King's, Heschel's and Dewey's overlapping interpretations of American democracy's political ethic of belief. It seems clear to me, as the analysis in this dissertation will show, that the figures under consideration are neither engaged primarily in deliberation nor agonism; they work to legitimate their proposed vision for American democracy by exercising the "consent of the governed" neither purely deliberatively through the exchange

⁷⁵ Ibid., 422.

of (public) reasons, nor purely agonistically through contestation and power struggle. Rather, they do so hermeneutically; they are engaged in *public interpretation*. Their public interpretations aim to raise Americans' consciousness to shared meanings by juxtaposing them against religious, philosophical, or moral ideas/symbols/meanings that are shared by some but not by all. As such, they are both overlapping and interpretations. A theory of democracy that can capture these dynamics must understand the exercise of popular sovereignty (and, thus, the legitimation of democracy) not to involve only deliberative or agonistic activity, but the public interpretation of the beliefs democracy requires in terms that are meaningful to us. Thus, such a theory of democracy will be hermeneutic and dialogic: *it will understand the legitimation of democracy to involve the practice of making sense of shared meanings in terms that may or may not be shared.*

Religious social critics' overlapping interpretations may be offered in the context of "agonistic" power politics, and they may or may not contribute to some kind of a "consensus." If they do reference a consensus, it will not necessarily be a rationally-grounded, overlapping consensus like Rawls imagines, and may well take the form of the kind of "conflictual consensus," that Mouffe imagines. In all cases, the four religious social critics in question reference a set of shared understandings about the humanistic axiology implicit in American democracy's ideal of popular sovereignty that rely on such (ongoing) interpretation to be made both explicit and intelligible. Therefore, as I have already suggested, the hermeneutic relationship between religion and American democracy is better conceived on the model of a *conversation* than a consensus or a contest, because it involves the ongoing dialogue between a set of meanings that Americans share with diverse sets of meanings that they do not. It is this

hermeneutic and dialogic approach to theorizing the relationship between religion and democracy which I will construct and substantiate in the chapters that follow.

1. John Dewey's Psychological Theory of Democracy

Introduction: Studying Democracy's Doctrines

In this study, I will examine the beliefs American democracy, and specifically its ideal of popular sovereignty, requires of its members. For this reason, I immediately face the methodological task of establishing the possibility of studying such beliefs. Indeed, my choice to focus on American democracy's a political ethic of belief requires me first to outline precisely how I believe that to be possible, and how I specifically propose to do so.

An obvious methodological approach to accessing and observing beliefs is through the examination of creeds. The scholar can indeed access professions of beliefs through the various kinds of ritual or scriptural articulations and reaffirmations of those beliefs. This is no less true for political creeds than it is for religious creeds. Attention to the role of formal statements of our political beliefs, for example those as they are found in the Declaration of Independence, as well as ritualistic reaffirmations of them, do provide important data to evaluate in any exploration of political beliefs. Therefore, they will play an important role in the method I develop in this project. Such statements and rituals are important explicit and conscious articulations of American democracy's political ethic of belief, and as we will see, religious social critics often reference them in the course of articulating their social criticism.

However, there is no *prima facie* reason to believe that the beliefs which American democracy requires of its members will always be explicitly stated; it is unlikely that they will be neatly stated in founding documents or the statements of statesmen and politicians, and when they are, there is similarly no reason to presume that they will be self-interpreting. In fact, there is good reason to be skeptical that the beliefs our own political arrangement requires are always immediately transparent to us.

This is the case because American democracy's belief-demands are an implicit part of its ideal of popular sovereignty, and thus implicitly baked into our democratic tradition, the doctrines that permeate our political culture and our institutions. Given that this is the case, the beliefs that are implied and required by a commitment to self-rule stand in need of interpreters who can make them explicit and, in doing so, help us make sense of these political beliefs in terms that are meaningful to us. But are there such interpreters? Where do we look for such political prophets?

I will argue that a good place to find these interpreters is among social critics. As I noted in the previous chapter, I consider as my main points of reflection statements made by four twentieth century social critics who are also interpreters of American democracy's political ethic of belief: John Courtney Murray; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Abraham Joshua Heschel; and John Dewey. Each of these interpreters engages in writing and activism that invokes what they take to be the beliefs that American democracy requires of its members. That is to say, they are social critics who often (though by no means exclusively) levy their social criticism on the basis of American democracy's political ethic of belief. As such, their statements constitute first-order interpretations of our shared political tradition, and in particular its belief-dimensions, along with their implications for individual or collective action.

More specifically, however, I will argue that the statements of specifically *religious* social critics afford the scholar of political belief a methodological and interpretive advantage when considering the question of political beliefs. This is because these religious social critics interpret American democracy in terms of the overlap that arises through their multiple memberships in two overlapping collectives. One might paraphrase: as Americans, these figures are able to interpret American democracy in and on its own terms; as religionists, they are able to

interpret American democracy in and on other religious, philosophical, and moral terms. And these religious social critics characteristically do both.

Precisely because these religious social critics not only invoke American democracy's political ethic of belief in levying their criticism, but do so by simultaneously invoking religious signs and symbols, their statements provide the scholar particularly clear evidence of American democracy's political ethic of belief as well as evidence of the specifically political nature of the required beliefs. Their statements provide evidence of American democracy's political ethic of belief insofar as their efforts to interpret democracy's doctrines in overlapping terms that are meaningful to themselves and their co-religionists provide evidence of each interpreters' self-understanding that he or she is subject to a requirement to take certain propositions to be true, at least for the purposes of political life. And because of this requirement, she finds herself making recourse to religion in her efforts to make sense of that demand and the content of the required beliefs in terms that are meaningful to her. Furthermore, these social critics' religious interpretations of American democracy's doctrines throw into relief the specifically political nature of the requirement to believe them. It is through this contrast that this characteristic most sharply emerges.

Therefore, in order to consider American democracy's political ethic of belief and to make sense of the statements and activism of these four social critics, I aim to develop a hermeneutics of political belief: a method or theory of interpretation of political beliefs, and specifically the beliefs required by American democracy. I have alluded to this method in the paragraphs above. Developing this account is my task in this and the following chapter.

Developing this hermeneutics with regards to American democracy requires both a theory of democracy and a theory of interpretation. In this chapter and the next, I will explore

one promising example of each, and then consider how they both challenge and complement each other. Specifically, I will turn to John Dewey's political philosophy for the former and Michael Walzer's theory of interpretation and social criticism for the latter. As an account of the beliefs required by a political tradition, such a hermeneutics must include 1) an account of the constitution and nature of the relevant polity; 2) a method of accessing and interpreting the beliefs it requires of its members; 3) an account of the content of these beliefs; and 4) an account of the grounds on which one can call these beliefs political.

To that end, I will begin in this chapter by exploring John Dewey's political philosophy because Dewey offers an account of democracy that theorizes the implications of democracy's commitment to popular sovereignty on collective mind and collective action in a way that specifically isolates and highlights the beliefs entailed by a commitment to democracy. In short, I draw on Dewey because he helps us consider one of the questions at the heart of this dissertation: what does democracy require us to believe?

Democracy as Consciousness

Dewey outlines his understanding of democracy chiefly in *The Public and Its Problems*. In this text, Dewey responds to Walter Lippmann's influential arguments in favor of placing the task of self-governance in the hands of a technocratic elites, which Lippmann advocated due to what he saw as inherent and insurmountable challenges posed by the attempt to govern according to public opinion or public interest. Lippmann's work dismisses the notion of "the public" as it was used in democratic theory of the time. It does so on the grounds that the development of such an adequately informed citizenry is a practical impossibility due to citizen's insufficient interest in and access to accurate information about their environment, as well the fact that the

perpetual distortion of these facts by cognitive biases, culture, media and educational background.

In his response, Dewey offers an alternative picture of self-government and the formation of public interest in which the development of an adequately informed public is, indeed, possible. In fact, the hallmark of John Dewey's theory of democracy in *The Public and Its Problems* is its marriage of a conception of democracy as a kind of consciousness with a consequentialist interpretation of popular sovereignty ("The Public"). It is this combination that Dewey uses to draw out the implications of democracy's commitment to popular sovereignty on both collective mind and collective action.¹ To put this point briefly: Dewey's understanding of popular sovereignty imagines collective self-government to involve certain beliefs about and a certain regard for the political other that makes possible purposeful action in light of our membership in the collective(s) of which we are a part. Thus, a key advantage that Dewey's theory of democracy offers this study is that it helps us theorize democracy in a way that specifically isolates and highlights the beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions that are entailed by membership in it. For this reason, a brief sketch of this vision of democracy, which I refer to as Dewey's democratic conscioquentialism, proves instructive.

¹ Dewey contrasts this approach with the "multitude" of theories of the state which political philosophy has so far produced, all of which share a mistaken focus on "causal agency." Dewey argues that this focus on "force" and "causal agency" draws political philosophy into "mythology" that conjures up explanations for "state-forming forces." Moreover, Dewey thinks this effort has two negative consequences: First, the theories such political philosophy produces merely "reduplicate in a so-called force the effects to be accounted for" and as such discourage further investigation and critical reflection on the subject; Second, it draws the political philosopher's attention away from the facts of human activity and human behavior. See pp. 8-9, 20-21.

Dewey's Democratic Conscioquentialism

One must note at the outset that Dewey's democratic conscioquentialism is informed by his broader philosophical worldview, which I refer to as his "humanistic naturalism," and which I discuss at length in Chapter 6. However, in drawing on Dewey's political theory, I do not mean to suggest that one must become a Deweyan pragmatist in order to use his theory to help make sense of the beliefs that American democracy requires and/or their constitutional role in American democracy. Rather, I want to suggest that using Dewey's political philosophy in the way that I do in this dissertation only necessitates the assumption of three, much more modest philosophical premises. Dewey identifies these premises at the start of *The Public and Its Problems*: The first is that human acts have consequences that affect other humans; the second is that human intelligence enables humans to observe and perceive these consequences; the third premise is that perception of such consequences can and does yield (combined) human effort to both pursue and avoid particular consequences.² In addition to these premises, Dewey further specifies two kinds of consequences: "those which affect the persons directly engaged in a transaction, and those which affect others beyond those immediately concerned."³ These assumptions constitute the philosophical backdrop to Dewey's political theory, and although they are propositions that are supported by his particular humanistic naturalism, I also take them to be generally uncontroversial propositions about human community and human action, and ones that can be and are supported by any number of philosophical, religious, and moral worldviews.

Beginning with these premises makes plain the first characteristic of Dewey's democratic conscioquentialism: its emphasis on the role of consequences in theorizing political order, and in particular his understanding that the exercise of popular sovereignty involves action in light of an

² John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1954), 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

awareness of the consequences of collective action(s). One especially observes this emphasis in Dewey's discussion of the Public, which is the key concept in Dewey's political philosophy.

Dewey argues that a "Public" is group of people bound together by individual and collective actions that yield consequences that affect them all.⁴ He argues that "those indirectly and seriously affected for good or for evil [by the consequences of combined action] form a group distinctive enough to require recognition and a name. The name selected is The Public."⁵ Viewed in the broad context of Dewey's political theory, "The Public" represents what is frequently discussed in democratic political theory under the rubrics of "the popular sovereign," the "demos," "the General Will," etc. In all cases, it is a grouping of human beings (imagined or actual) whose constitution furnishes the principle(s) for legitimate governance.

Dewey does not use the terminology of "popular sovereignty" himself, despite the fact that his analysis suggests that Dewey's notion of "The Public" does function as such, especially to the extent that it helps him articulate a theory of collective self-rule. Dewey advances the concept of "The Public" in the chapter entitled, "Search for the Public," as an alternative to the concept of "The State" as it has been traditionally used in political philosophy. In doing so, Dewey specifically wants to advance a framework which avoids invoking the concepts and methods which political philosophers traditionally associate with the analyses of "The State," because he thinks these debates are doomed to pay too little attention actual human activity in their theorizations of political order. He writes that:

Without our intention and without our notice, the notion of 'The State' draws us imperceptibly into a consideration of the logical relationship of various ideas to one another, and away from facts of human activity. It is better, if possible, to start from the latter and see if we are not led thereby into an idea of something which will turn out to implicate the marks and signs which characterize political behavior.⁶

⁴ Ibid., 24-28, 35.

⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁶ Ibid., 8-9.

It is likely for this reason that Dewey eschews concepts typically associated with democracy, including “popular sovereignty,” “rule by the people,” and “consent of the governed” in his political theory. Instead, he coins a term of art, “The Public,” to help him describe the nature of popular sovereignty and the popular sovereign in terms of the facts of human activity (actual extant collectives joined by actual consequences of combined actions), instead of in terms of logical relations of concepts.

Nevertheless, Dewey does find the concept of “the State” useful for articulating his political theory. He sharpens his definition of the Public by contrasting it with the State, arguing that the Public is prior to the State. Whereas the Public is the collective bound by consequences of collective action that affects those beyond the people immediately concerned, the State comprises the institutions and offices through which a Public may be organized, expressed, and cared for. As such, the State represents a necessary, though distinct, institutional instantiation of a Public. Dewey stresses the necessity of such a social organ, warning that, “consequences have to be taken care of, looked out for. This supervision and regulation cannot be effected by the primary groupings themselves...Consequently special agencies and measures must be formed if they are to be attended to.”⁷ Thus, Dewey emphasizes the necessary and simultaneous roles of both a State *and* a Public in his political theory, and stresses both their relatedness and distinctiveness. Dewey does so, at least in part, in order to make clear that he does not believe that democracy can be reduced to democratic governmental institutions or practices, like those of the State.

Furthermore, Dewey coins the term, “The Public,” in order to help him make plain what is necessary to turn such an “association” of people into a “community.” The Public may be

⁷ Ibid., 27.

organized and controlled by any number of forces, and Dewey firmly believes that making it into a democratic community worthy of the name will require individual and collective choice, desire, and effort. Specifically, he argues that members of the Public must *reflect* on those consequences which affect people beyond those immediately engaged in a transaction because such reflection generates a shared interest which thereby transforms the interconnected behavior into behavior that can be guided intelligently, according to shared aims, desires, and purposes. When this happens, then, The Public is no longer merely interconnected behavior or association; it becomes a “community.”⁸

Crucial for the study at hand: it is “the clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, [that] constitutes the idea of democracy” for Dewey.⁹ This is the second characteristic feature of Dewey’s democratic conscioquentialism. He conceives of democracy not primarily as a set of institutions, a tradition, a doctrine, or a distribution of decision-making procedure (i.e. voting). Rather, he describes democracy as a kind of consciousness—a consciousness of The Public and the desire and ability to act in light of it. In doing so, Dewey portrays democracy as something importantly psychological. It is a certain attitude, awareness, a state of mind (collective and individual).

Indeed, the importance of consciousness in his democratic theory is already evident in the crucial role that reflection on the consequences of combined action plays in turning the Public into a true community: individual citizens come to acquire this consciousness through reflection on the “consequences of combined action.”¹⁰ Thus, on Dewey’s account, democracy itself results from and is sustained by the reflection on consequences of combined action that call a Public

⁸ Ibid., 149-152.

⁹ Ibid., 149.

¹⁰ Ibid., 152.

into being. Here, one immediately observes the close connection between Dewey's consequentialist picture of popular sovereignty (The Public) and the idea of democracy: reflection on the consequences of collective life results in a new or transformed consciousness of the common interests of the collective of which one is a member. Dewey names the consciousness of these consequences and all their implications "democracy."

In this way, Dewey's theory of democracy represents a democratic conscioquentialism that provides a vision of democratic community that is grounded in an understanding of popular sovereignty that combines both attention to matters of individual and collective action (consequences) with attention to democracy's psychological dynamics (consciousness). As such, it is a theory of democracy well suited to a study that examines both the psychological and doxastic aspects of democracy as well as their implications for collective action.

At this juncture, one does well to note a key implication of these two features of Dewey's democratic conscioquentialist framework. Because the result of the collective reflection on the consequences of combined action that constitutes both community and democracy for Dewey is a certain awareness or consciousness, a key implication of his democratic conscioquentialism is that a certain kind of consciousness-raising is, in fact, democratizing. It is, in short, an exercise in collective self-rule, or popular sovereignty. Conversely, democracy necessarily involves a certain consciousness-raising if such popular sovereignty is going to be exercised in the world. These observations invites the question: what factors and forces impede or promote the kind of consciousness-raising reflection Dewey has in mind?

Democracy's Problem: An Eclipse of the Public

Answering this question is one of Dewey's key goals in *The Public and Its Problems*. He aims to identify the problems facing the Public and hopes to offer a constructive solution for how modern industrial democracies might solve them. To do so, Dewey reflects on and identifies the factors that impede such consciousness-raising reflection in his own lifetime, specifically due to the rapid, widespread, and permeating rise of technology and industrialization in "the machine age."

This historical epoch is characterized by the advent of new industrial enterprises and mechanical forces that have resulted from industrialization, all of which operate on a previously unimaginable scale and across previously unimaginable geographic expanses. In doing so, Dewey suggests that these forces of the machine age unite the political association in a new scope and on a new scale. He writes that, "railways, travel and transportation, commerce, the mails, telegraph and telephone, newspapers, create enough similarity of ideas and sentiments to keep the thing [political association] going as a whole, for they create interaction and interdependence."¹¹ However, he also suggests that there are decided costs to the kind of association that the technological forces of big business, mass industrialization, transportation revolutions and telecommunications technologies have generated: it is no longer a particularly democratic kind of association.

Specifically, describes these costs to American democracy with the key and signature metaphor of "Eclipse," warning that all is not well with American democracy because the Public is in "Eclipse." Dewey argues that the technological developments of the machine age have

¹¹ Ibid., 114.

obscured individual human beings' ability to reflect on "the consequences of combined action" by obscuring those very consequences. Dewey warns that:

...the machine age has so enormously expanded, multiplied, intensified and complicated the *scope of the indirect consequences* [of conjoint and interaction behavior], have formed such immense and consolidated unions in action, on an impersonal rather than a community basis that the resultant public cannot identify and distinguish itself... There are *too many publics* and *too much of public concern* for our existing resources to cope with. The problem of a democratically organized public is primarily and essentially an intellectual problem, in a degree to which the political affairs of prior ages offer no parallel.¹²

Here Dewey makes plain that, by obscuring the consequences of combined action, the forces of machine age have "eclipsed" the Public in the United States. Forces such as the large-scale and de-localized transportation and communication, and commerce networks have created an interconnected collective, a "Public," that is so large, diffuse, and inchoate that it cannot organize itself "intelligently" or "deliberately," according to aims or purposes. As such, it has no hope of becoming anything that Dewey would call a "community." It is for this reason that Dewey argues the Public is in "Eclipse."

Specifically, Dewey argues that, by making impossible the perception and observation of the consequences of conjoint actions, the forces of the machine age have obscured the ability of human intelligence to perceive and observe these consequences. As a result, the forces of the machine age also make impossible the consciousness that arises from being able to not only perceive and observe these consequences but also to reflect on them and act purposefully. Indeed, Dewey argues that the combination of an inhibition of human intelligence as well as consciousness of the consequences of our collective actions, also makes impossible the pursuit and/or avoidance of any particular consequences of collective action. By cutting off the ability to perceive and observe the consequences of combined action, the conditions of the machine age

¹² Ibid., 126, emphases added.

prevent human beings from using intelligence to perceive these consequences, and also thereby prevents them from being able to pursue or avoid particular consequences. These three dynamics combine to create the perfect storm in which individuals are not only unconscious of the relevant collectives of which they are already a part but are also unable to therefore act in light of or response to the reality of that membership. They are part of a Public or Publics which they cannot identify or control, and thus cannot make into true, intelligently and purposefully organized communities.

Dewey illustrates these dynamics regarding the changing nature of the collectives of which American citizens are members. With respect to American society, he argues that the Eclipse of the Public by the machine age has dissolved genuine community life in the United States without providing an adequate alternative. He suggests that the machine age has both dissolved the small-scale communities of pre-industrial America, characterized by “genuine community life” which bequeathed to us the “American democratic polity” and the corresponding set of institutions and ideas.¹³ As Dewey phrases it:

We have inherited, in short, local town-meeting practices and ideas. But we live and act and have our being in a continental national state....Our modern state-unity is due to the consequences of technology employed so as to facilitate the rapid and easy circulation of opinions and information, and so as to generate constant and intricate interaction far beyond the limits of face-to-face communities. Political and legal forms have only piecemeal and haltingly, with great lag, accommodated themselves to this transformation.¹⁴

The machine age’s technological developments in infrastructure, commerce, and media have already yielded a new kind of collective in America, which he calls a “Great Society.” This Great Society represents the extant collective for which the consequences of combined action remain nevertheless difficult to apprehend, and therefore unorganized, disintegrated, and impossible to

¹³ Ibid., 111.

¹⁴ Ibid., 113-14.

regulate.¹⁵ The Great Society is thus the name for the American Public that is in Eclipse. This Eclipse involves precisely the creation of such a Great Society without the simultaneous creation of a “Great Community”, characterized by “genuine community” where community members can meaningfully apprehend and reflect on the consequences of combined action.¹⁶ An Eclipse of the Public amounts to a situation where an extant collective cannot organize itself according to shared aims and desires, and thus cannot become a true “community” on Dewey’s picture. This is the case in the United States, Dewey believes: the Public remains in Eclipse, and by extension, democracy is diminished.

Because the conditions ushered in by the machine age have rendered Americans unable to distinguish the relevant collective of which they are a part, let alone apprehend its common aims or interests, or act in light of them, this Eclipse poses a fundamental threat to Americans’ ability to act intelligently or purposefully (both as individuals and as a collective) in the world. For this reason, Dewey concludes that it therefore also poses a democratic threat: it threatens to our ability to collectively self-govern. Dewey remains convinced that this problem presents American society with an enormous challenge.

Dewey’s Solution: A Semiotics of Social Inquiry

In order to address this problem facing the Public, Dewey advances what I term a semiotics of social inquiry. In it, he articulates a specialized account of political constitution: one in which community is constituted through communication. For this reason, it bears dwelling for

¹⁵ Ibid., 128.

¹⁶ Ibid., 126-27. For a fuller discussion of Dewey’s use of the term “community,” see the following section on his semiotics of social inquiry.

a moment on what Dewey means by “community” and the role it plays in the semiotics he advances for overcoming an Eclipse of the Public.

Dewey argues that a certain kind of symbolic communication has the power to solve the Problem of a Public in Eclipse: he argues that communication can transform the “Great Society” (where the Public is in Eclipse) into a “Great Community” (where the Public is no longer eclipsed).¹⁷ As I suggested above, Dewey uses the term “community” to invoke a certain image of a specific kind of human association, one that is constituted through communication and not primarily by other more typical, organic, and contingent factors like geography, ethnicity, shared history, etc. As such, the kind of collectives Dewey refers to as “communities” are not primary, given, natural, or organic facts. Dewey warns explicitly that, though he recognizes human associated and collective activity itself to be a primary and organic fact of human existence, “no amount of aggregated collective action of itself constitutes a community.”¹⁸

Instead, Dewey suggests that community is something importantly psychological: it is a shared perceiving, willing, and striving for certain consequences. As such, Dewey suggests that community is not merely constituted through associated action but is also constituted psychologically to the degree it engages the emotions, intelligence and consciousness. He writes that:

‘we’ and ‘our’ exist only when the consequences of combined action are perceived and become an object of desire and effort...Human associations may be ever so organic in origin and firm in operation, but they develop into societies in a human sense only as their consequences, being known, are esteemed and sought for.¹⁹

Here Dewey offers a picture of human beings united not only in action, but also in perception, desire, and effort. He locates the origin of what he calls “community” in the ability of its

¹⁷ Ibid., 152-53.

¹⁸ Ibid., 151.

¹⁹ Ibid., 151-52.

members to perceive, desire, and pursue the consequences of combined action. In fact, Dewey maintains that these psychological dimensions play such an important role in constituting a community that, “the planets in a constellation would form a community if they were aware of the connections of the activities of each with those of the others and could use this knowledge to direct behavior.”²⁰

For his part, Dewey prefers the term “moral” to describe these psychological aspects of communal life that are characterized by conscious purpose and effort. As he puts it: “Associated or joint activity is a condition of the creation of a community. But association itself is physical and organic, while communal life is *moral* that is emotionally, intellectually, consciously sustained.”²¹ For the purposes of clarity and consistency in this dissertation, I shall use “psychological” to describe these aspects of communal life that engage the emotions, intelligence, and consciousness in the way Dewey describes.

Yet, these observations only raise the question: how does this psychological activity, a certain perceiving, willing, and striving constitute a community? How can communal life be “emotionally, intellectually, and consciously sustained” in practice? How does this work? Answering these questions requires pausing to consider the detailed mechanics of Dewey’s theory of the constitution of a community, particularly because it underpins his constructive, semiotic solution to overcoming Eclipses of the Public.

In the key passage below, Dewey argues that the transformation of the accidentally, unconsciously, organic combined activity of human beings into a community occurs by means of the development of signs and symbols that enable the apprehension of and invocation of social

²⁰ Ibid., 25.

²¹ Ibid., 151, emphasis added.

consequences of collective actions which also enable and repose against the shared meaning of these conjoint activities. He writes:

Only when there exist [in combined activity] *signs or symbols* of activities and of their outcome can the flux be viewed as from without, be arrested for consideration and esteem, and be regulated...when phases of the process [of interaction] are represented by signs, a new medium is interposed. As symbols are related to one another, the important relations of a course of events are recorded and are preserved as meanings. Recollection and foresight are possible; the new medium facilitates calculation, planning, and a new kind of action which intervenes in what happens to direct its course in the interest of what is foreseen and desired.

Symbols in turn depend on and promote communication. The results of conjoint experience are considered and transmitted. Events cannot be passed from one to another, but meanings may be shared by means of signs. Wants and impulses are then attached to common meanings. They are thereby transformed into desires and purposes, which, since they implicate a common or mutually understood meaning, present new ties, converting a conjoint activity into a community of interest and endeavor. Thus there is generated what, metaphorically, may be termed a general will and social consciousness: desire and choice on the part of individuals in behalf of activities that, by means of symbols, are communicable and shared by all concerned. A community thus presents an order of energies transmuted into one of meanings which are appreciated and mutually referred by each to every other on the part of those engaged in combined action. "Force" is not eliminated but is transformed in use and direction by ideas and sentiments made possible by means of symbols.²²

In this passage, Dewey outlines the detailed mechanics of his theory of constitution of a community described above. In brief, he argues that signs and symbols enable the preservation and communication of the meanings of a course of events or collective action(s). He argues that, by communicating with and through these signs and symbols that represent the results of our "conjoint experience," we are able to consider, foresee, imagine, and reflect on the *meaning* of these collective activities *for us*. Thus, both these consequences and the signs and symbols representing them enable us to share the meaning of these consequences with our fellows.

Crucially, we use these shared meanings to transform our more basic, isolated, and individually oriented "wants and desires" into "desires and purposes" which reference these

²² Ibid., 153.

shared meanings and, by doing so, offer new ways of binding the wills of individuals together and thus transforming our “conjoint activity” into a community which perceives, desires, and wills *together*. Thus, 1) the consequences of conjoint actions, 2) the signs and symbols representing those consequences, and 3) the meaning of these consequences work together to constitute a true community for Dewey. As he puts it, this process yields both a general will *and* a social consciousness, a union of desire and purpose and an awareness of one’s place and participation in that social whole. And because the transformed will and raised consciousness of a community is only constituted through the esteeming of and seeking particular consequences of combined action, the understanding of which is informed by shared meanings, he reasons, true communities “demand communication as a prerequisite.”²³

In this way, Dewey maintains that this kind of communication that makes possible shared experience is crucial to overcoming an Eclipse of the Public by the forces of the machine age. As he puts it: “till the Great Society is converted into a Great Community, the Public will remain in eclipse. Communication can alone create a great community. Our Babel is not one of tongues but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible.”²⁴ Thus, it is clear that in the specialized sense in which Dewey uses the term, “communication” denotes the successful communication of the meaning of social consequences that makes possible shared experience in and of a community, as well as makes possible the community itself.²⁵

But how might one communicate such meaning—in particular in the face of the Eclipse of the Public? And who can engage in such community-constituting communication? To answer these questions, Dewey connects the above semiotics specifically to the power of social inquiry.

²³ Ibid. 152.

²⁴ Ibid., 142.

²⁵ Ibid., 180.

In doing so, he aims to describe how individuals and collectives apply collective and individual intelligence to collective problems and collective action by relying on the work of social scientists and artists to communicate the meaning of social consequences.

Concerning the means of this communication, Dewey maintains that community-constituting communication occurs precisely through the invocation of “*signs* and *symbols* of activities and of their outcomes [which] can...be arrested for consideration and esteem, and be regulated.”²⁶ Specifically, he argues that symbolic representation of the results of social inquiry enables recollection, foresight, calculation, planning, because such signs and symbols enable human beings to use their intellect to guide their individual and collective action toward what is foreseen and desired.²⁷

Thus, in Dewey’s theory of democracy, signs and symbols serve as a crucial point of reflection and coordination 1) out of which the consciousness that defines democracy can arise and 2) that intelligence can use to inform and guide both individual and collective action to solve shared problems. Dewey thus argues that, should communication through such signs and symbols can be affected on a scale appropriate to the challenges posed by the technological developments of the machine age, it will convey intelligible meanings of the consequences combined action upon which citizens of the Great Society will be able to reflect and which they will in turn be able to act intelligently, together. This is what Dewey means when he argues that the solution to an Eclipse of the Public involves “the perfecting of the means and ways of communication of meanings so that genuinely shared interest in the consequences of interdependent activities may inform desire and effort and thereby direct action.”²⁸ Should this

²⁶ Ibid., 152.

²⁷ Ibid., 152-3.

²⁸ Ibid., 155.

occur, Dewey maintains that the relevant Public(s) will no longer be obscured or eclipsed and a Great Society will become a Great Community. Having thoroughly reflected on the consequences of combined action, the members of this Great Community will be characterized by that the kind of consciousness of their community and their place in it that constitutes Dewey's idea of democracy, and will be able to act intelligently, both individually and collectively, on the basis of this consciousness.

Regarding the agents of this symbolic communication, Dewey suggests that this kind of communication that will overcome a Public's eclipse will be primarily effected through 1) academic and educational institutions pursuing social inquiry and 2) artists who can fully and movingly communicate the results of such inquiry through their art. This is because he maintains that only organized and effective social inquiry will provide the necessary prerequisite knowledge for making judgments concerning the Public/the common interest. Furthermore, Dewey argues that this knowledge, as knowledge about something inherently public and social, in fact entails necessary communication and distribution. He argues that:

...a thing is fully known only when it is published, shared, socially accessible... Knowledge cooped up in a private consciousness is a myth, and knowledge of social phenomena is peculiarly dependent upon dissemination, for only by distribution can such knowledge be either obtained or tested. A fact of community life which is not spread abroad so as to be a common possession is a contradiction in terms...Communication of the results of social inquiry is the same thing as the formation of public opinion. This marks one of the first ideas framed in the growth of political democracy as it will be one of the last to be fulfilled. For public opinion is judgment which is formed and entertained by those who constitute the public and is about public affairs. Each of the two phases imposes for its realization conditions hard to meet.²⁹

Thus, Dewey reasons that only effective communication of the results of this social inquiry will subsequently form Public opinion.³⁰ He argues that it is precisely artists who are in the best

²⁹ Ibid., 177.

³⁰ Ibid.,180, 177.

position to affect the distribution of the knowledge that social inquiry yields because they have the power to break through human beings' every-day and superficial consciousness, including the consciousness that is suffering from Eclipse, and touch human beings to generate desire, effort and thus inform action.³¹

In this way, Dewey proposes a semiotics of social inquiry grounded in a communicative theory of democratic constitution as a solution to the Eclipse of the Public. In doing so, he draws on his broader democratic conscioquentialism to provide a constructive political vision of social scientists engaging in social inquiry and artists movingly communicating the results of that inquiry through signs and symbols, in turn enabling the application of individual and collective intelligence to the collective problems facing the Great Society and thereby transforming it into a Great Community united by a raised-consciousness, characterized by newly shared desires and purposes. In doing so, such communication restores the possibility of popular sovereignty: in the face of threats to popular sovereignty by the conditions of the machine age, Dewey suggests that the collective consciousness created by such semiotic communication becomes key to the kind of community characterized by the exercise of collective self-rule under these conditions.

Dewey's Lacuna: Interpretation

Yet, for all his clarity about the psychological dynamics of democracy, the nature of the Eclipse of the Public, and his precision and optimism in naming the agents and method of solution, Dewey's reliance on solely academic and institutions and artists in the solution he proposes in his semiotics of social inquiry is decidedly narrow. We should question why he leaves unaddressed who else could affect an overcoming of the Public's Eclipse. Are there not

³¹ Ibid., 184-5.

additional agents of such Public-illuminating communication who can provide the requisite knowledge to make judgments concerning the Public interest and do so effectively through signs and symbols so as to yield action? Are only social-scientists and artists (even broadly construed) able to contribute to rescuing the Public from Eclipse in the United States? Why not religious leaders, or everyday religionists? Indeed, as we will see, each of the religious figures treated in the subsequent chapters challenge Dewey's narrowness on this score.

To be sure, Dewey evinces some awareness in *The Public and Its Problems* that other institutional and collective forces, including those of religion, might play a role in this communication. He addresses this question most clearly in his discussion of the possible instantiations of the ideal of democracy in society. Despite admitting the close connection between “democracy as a social idea” and “political democracy as a system of government,” Dewey makes clear that he does not consider the State to be the only arena for the realization of the ideal of democracy.³² Specifically, he warns that the idea of democracy must not be interpreted to merely pertain to political or social forms of association. Rather, he suggests that, because the idea of democracy “is the idea of community life itself,” it can therefore be actualized in all modes of human association. He writes that, “the idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best. To be realized it must affect all modes of human association, the family, the school, industry, *religion*.”³³ Here, Dewey suggests that diverse kinds of associations—including religious associations—can pursue the idea of democracy's realization. In fact, for the ideal of democracy to be realized, it must affect all of these modes of association.

³² Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 143.

³³ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

However, Dewey leaves underspecified both the specific roles he envisions for such associations in overcoming the Public's eclipse and the effects vis-à-vis the Public of pursuing the ideal of democracy in these other modes of human association, although the general implication is that they will be positive. Regarding the effects vis-à-vis the Public itself, the general tendency of Dewey's theory suggests that that the collective actions of various non-State associations may also work to care for the Public interest and contribute to the process of making a "community" out of a Public by encouraging their members to reflect on the consequences of their combined action(s) and, in doing so, raising their members' consciousness to the collectives of which they are a part and their places in them.

Looking beyond these brief statements, one might reason with Dewey as follows: because Dewey's idea of democracy consists in a certain consciousness arising from reflection on the consequences of collective action, the pursuit of this consciousness is of Public consequence regardless of who the actors are and in which specific human associative context they are acting: it is precisely this kind of action that generates and sustains a Public. In this way, it would seem that Dewey's theory is at least potentially open to contributions from actors beyond social scientists and artists, including religious actors. Nevertheless, regarding a discussion of who these actors could be, how they might contribute to overcoming an Eclipse, and what their contributions might entail, Dewey has little to say beyond the remarks about social-scientists and artists noted above.

Yet, the question remains: to what extent does Dewey's constructive solution to an Eclipse of the Public—what I have called his semiotics of social inquiry—sufficiently capture what is involved in the kind of communicative solution he proposes? Does Dewey convincingly establish that social scientists and artists will be up to the task of communicating the meaning of

the consequences of combined action? Why are they the only actors who can rescue the Public from Eclipse? Why can't religious figures do this?

Dewey's semiotics of social inquiry misses potential semiotic contributions from religious traditions and religionists that work to overcome Eclipses of the Public. This is because, in both his semiotics of social inquiry and his theory of religion, Dewey fails to sufficiently account for the role of interpretation and its obvious connection to semiotic communication and, for that matter, religious traditions. With these thoughts in mind, I now turn to Dewey's statements about both religion and the artist in order to argue that Dewey's political philosophy needs a robust theory of social interpretation, both in order to function in the way Dewey imagines and to account for the semiotic contributions that religious actors can make to overcoming Eclipses of the Public.

Religion: Supernaturalism vs Dogmatism

Dewey's overall construal of religion evinces a lack of appreciation for the role that interpretation plays in religious traditions and I argue that this contributes to his oversight regarding the semiotic contributions of religious actors to overcoming Eclipses of the Public. This lacuna is particularly evident in his work most directly and famously devoted to the topic, *A Common Faith*.³⁴ In this text, Dewey aims to articulate an understanding of religion which is neither associated with "traditional" religions nor grounded in any sort of "supernatural" reality. Rather, he aims to describe the "religious" dimension(s) nature of natural human experience in the world, and he does so with the hope of disassociating this dimension of human experience from its historical association with traditional religion. For this reason, he famously distinguishes

³⁴ John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

“religion” from “religious experience,” with the latter describing a certain kind or quality of experience that “lends deep and enduring support to the process of living.”³⁵

In doing so, Dewey conflates what I call *supernaturalism* (the acceptance of a proposition on the authority of its supernatural, metaphysical, or “special” character) with what I call dogmatism (the acceptance of a proposition on basis of a singular authority in a way that involves the explicit repudiation of all other potential sources of authority). Indeed, Dewey’s conflation of supernaturalism with dogmatism reveals that Dewey’s broader understanding of religion fails to sufficiently consider matters of interpretation.

Specifically, in order to make his particular claims about “religious experience,” Dewey endorses a picture of religion that is centered on identifying the religious with the supernatural, a view that he presents in the opening words as widely shared and uncontroversial:

Never before in history has mankind has been so much of two minds, so divided into two camps, as it is today. Religions have traditionally been allied with ideas of the supernatural, and often have been based upon explicit beliefs about it. Today there are many who hold that nothing worthy of being called religious is possible apart from the supernatural... The opposed group consists of those who think the advance of culture and science has completely discredited the supernatural and with it all religions that were allied with belief in it... There is one idea held in common by these two opposite groups: identification of the religious with the supernatural.³⁶

Here, Dewey states that most people, even religionists and atheistic materialists, agree that identifying the religious with the supernatural characterizes “religion.” Dewey’s identification of religion with the supernatural is crucial to his own argument because this supernatural construal of traditional religions serves as both the foil against which he defines his naturalistic picture of “religious experience,” and the captor from which he aims to “free” this truly “religious experience.”

³⁵ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 14.

³⁶ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 1-2.

Dewey's primary complaint about the supernaturalness of religion is that it substitutes the authority of the supernatural for the authority of experience.³⁷ He argues that members of such traditions hold such ideals or propositions as true, "on the credit of their supernatural author," instead of due to any sort of verifiable or testable experience in the world.³⁸ In fact, Dewey maintains that "the inherent vice of all intellectual schemes of idealism is that they convert the idealism of action into a system of beliefs about antecedent reality." In the case of religion, that antecedent reality is supernatural, metaphysical, or divine.³⁹ Here one observes Dewey's concern with traditional religion's supernaturalism, or the acceptance of a proposition on the authority of its supernatural, metaphysical, or "special" character.

However, Dewey goes further and argues that the attribution of authority to religious ideals on the basis of their supernaturalness causes religionists to relate wrongly to religious ideals. Indeed, this is Dewey's main objection in *A Common Faith*, and a criticism he makes of traditional religion throughout many of his writings and speeches. Yet, this allegation is not a complaint about the supernatural or metaphysical doctrines as such, but rather the affective relationship of an individual to those ideas and ideals. As such, Dewey's critique constitutes not so much a critique of supernaturalism as it does a critique of the dogmatism he identifies with it.

In fact, it is precisely the endorsement of a singular authority (i.e. authority of the supernatural etc.) at the expense of other kinds of authority (i.e., authority of experience) that Dewey attributes to these "supernatural" religions, and with which he is most concerned. Specifically, he argues that this attribution of authority to religious ideals on the basis of their supernatural author, metaphysical being, or relationship to a "specific authority" causes

³⁷ John Dewey, "What I Believe" (1930) *The Later Works of John Dewey 1925-1953* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 5:267-279.

³⁸ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 22

religionists to relate to the signs and symbols of religion in a peculiar way that protects those signs, symbols, and ideals from redescription or adjustment in light of experience. It reifies them and keeps them from being affected by the authority of experience. In doing so, it shields them from empirical validation or challenge through the method “of patient, cooperative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, record and controlled reflection.”⁴⁰ It is this imperviousness to the authority of experience with which Dewey takes issue, and this imperviousness is the main principle of critique that he levies against “religion” in *A Common Faith*.

However, as I suggested above, Dewey’s concern with the imperviousness to the authority of experience describes an aspect of dogmatism, and not a necessary part of supernaturalism. As I have defined the terms, supernaturalism refers to the acceptance of the authority of the supernatural, metaphysical etc., and dogmatism refers not only to the acceptance of a single source of authority (say, the supernatural), but also the repudiation of all other potential sources of authority. Bearing this distinction in mind, it becomes clear that Dewey conflates what are, in principle and also often in practice, two distinct phenomena. He does so by assuming that the imperviousness to the authority of experience (dogmatism) is necessarily a result of the acceptance of a proposition on the authority of its supernatural, metaphysical, or “special” character (supernaturalism). However, it is not obvious that, either conceptually or in the life of any actual religionist, the authority of the supernatural *necessarily* precludes or excludes the authority of experience.

Moreover, it is to this dogmatism that Dewey’s “common faith” responds. In articulating this “common faith,” Dewey describes precisely what he takes to be the proper affective

⁴⁰ Ibid., 30.

relationship to ideals, religious or otherwise. Dewey argues from the premise of a change in conditions which commends the authority of experience—the historical development of a particular ethic of belief surrounding the rise of the scientific method—to the conclusion that the only way to “rescue” the religious function in experience is through “the surrender of the whole notion of special truths that are religious by their own nature, together with the ideal of peculiar avenues to such truths.”⁴¹ Doing so would free the individuals formerly encumbered by supernatural religion to adopt the “faith” Dewey has in mind: a certain allegiance to the inclusive ideals which imagination generates out of experiences of natural goods and “to which the human will responds as worthy of controlling our desires and choices.”⁴²

However, in its failure to recognize the difference between dogmatism and supernaturalism, Dewey’s naturalistic “common faith” eschews supernaturalism while *reproducing* the dogmatism with which he is so concerned. Indeed, Dewey’s constructive religious solution substitutes one monism for another: he replaces what he takes to be the monism characteristic of religions (the authority of the supernatural) with the monism of his humanistic naturalism (the authority of experience).⁴³ Distinguishing between supernaturalism and dogmatism in this way enables one to see that Dewey’s constructive religious vision is thus equally subject to the allegation of dogmatism: it endorses a singular source of authority to the exclusion of all others. Indeed, the adoption of this kind of dogmatic monism is precisely the admission Dewey thinks is essential to releasing “religious experience” from the shackles of traditional religion: “For were we to admit that there is but one method for ascertaining fact and truth—that conveyed by the word “scientific” in its most general and generous sense—no

⁴¹ Ibid., 31.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ I discuss Dewey’s philosophical worldview, which I refer to as his “humanistic naturalism,” at length in Chapter 6.

discovery in any branch of knowledge and inquiry could then disturb the faith that is religious.”⁴⁴

To accomplish this feat, all we have to do is be dogmatic about the authority of experience, like Dewey is generally, and particularly in *A Common Faith*.

Yet, one of the advantages of distinguishing supernaturalism from dogmatism is that it pushes Dewey’s analysis in *A Common Faith* to consider *multiple* sources of authority and the ways in which they may exist and relate internal to a singular person or singular religious tradition. As I suggest above, I fail to find any *prime facie* reason to accept Dewey’s implicit assumption that the authority of the supernatural and the authority of experience are in principle or in practice monistic or mutually exclusive. In fact, in an earlier essay entitled “What I Believe,” Dewey acknowledges the fact that religious traditions have recognized and do recognize multiple sources of authority, including the authority of experience. He asks:

How about religion? Does renunciation of the extra-empirical compel also an abandonment of all religion? It certainly exacts a surrender of that supernaturalism and fixed dogma and rigid institutionalism with which Christianity has been historically associated. But as I read human nature and history, the intellectual content of religions has always finally adapted itself to scientific and social conditions after they have become clear. In a sense, it has been parasitic on the latter.⁴⁵

In this passage, Dewey recognizes that religions are not inherently or necessarily dogmatic, because he admits that they do and have “adapted” some of their “intellectual content” in light of the authority of experience in the form of new scientific developments and changing social conditions. In doing so, Dewey acknowledges both the historical reality and theoretical possibility of religious traditions drawing on and acknowledging multiple sources of authority simultaneously. This acknowledgement suggests that, in contrast to many of Dewey’s statements in *A Common Faith*, Dewey recognizes that religious ideals are not as unchanging, static, or

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Dewey, “What I Believe,” *Later Works* 5:272-73.

immune to redescription as Dewey suggests in that text. (And indeed, the cases considered in this dissertation will bear this out.) Rather, Dewey's statement in "What I Believe" suggests that religion's "special truths" are open to some change-over-time, that is, revision and reinterpretation.

In fact, in his effort to articulate how traditional religion might become an ally of the common faith that Dewey has in mind, Dewey himself suggests the powerful potential of the (re)interpretation of religious symbols and rites. He writes:

I would suggest that the future of religion is connected with the possibility of developing a faith in the possibilities of human experience that will create a vital sense of the solidarity of human interests and inspire action to make that sense a reality. If our nominal religious institutions learn how to use their symbols and rites to express and enhance such a faith, they may become useful allies of a conception of life that is in harmony with knowledge and social needs.⁴⁶

Here he suggests that religious traditions and institutions can learn how to reinterpret their symbols and rites in a way that they support the common faith he advances. Dewey admits not only the fact of the historical reinterpretation of religious ideals, and the recognition of multiple sources of authority, but also that religious symbols (ideals included) can be subject to reinterpretation. Thus, he suggests a picture of traditional religion as something that remains committed to its supernatural ideals and "special truths" in a way that can be non-dogmatic. And he suggests that the practice that makes this possible is the practice of interpretation.

Once one appreciates that the practice of (re)interpretation makes possible non-dogmatic relationships towards supernatural ideals and "special truths," it becomes apparent that there is no necessary reason to assume that historical religions necessarily encumber the growth of human experience in ordered richness in the way Dewey suggests. This fact leaves him without any ground upon which to argue that religious ideals and religionists would not be able to

⁴⁶ Ibid., 274.

contribute to overcoming an Eclipse of the Public in the way he imagines, and it suggests a broader need for his theory to grapple with matters of interpretation.

Artist: Presenter or Interpreter?

Dewey's picture of the artist likewise evinces a lack of appreciation for the role of interpretation implied by his semiotics of social inquiry. Recall that Dewey offers a both a theory of democratic constitution and semiotics of social inquiry that pictures individuals and collectives as being moved to act together through the cultivation of shared desires and purposes aimed at shared consequences as well as a consciousness of those shared desires and purposes. Furthermore, he singles out artists as those figures who are best able to take control of the means of communication and engage in the "full and moving communication" necessary for accomplishing this cultivation and consciousness-raising. However, in both cases, Dewey misses the necessary role interpretation plays in accomplishing the kind of communication he has in mind. Careful scrutiny of Dewey's "artist" makes plain this undertheorization. Upon such scrutiny, one finds evidence of Dewey's oversight regarding the role of interpretation in his treatment the artist as a presenter of results instead of as an interpreter of those results who makes recourse to already existing and meaning-saturated signs/symbols to make their interpretations. Moreover, this misconstrual of the artist as presenter enables him to skirt central questions about *who* can meaningfully engage in such interpretation, and *how* they are meaningfully able to do so.

Dewey's language of presentation betrays a narrow image of the artist as a mere reporter or presenter of the results of social inquiry. He consistently uses the language of "dissemination" and "presentation" to describe the nature of the artist's task. For example, Dewey writes that

“presentation is fundamentally important [to the task of disseminating the results of social inquiry], and presentation is a question of art.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, in the passage of *A Public and Its Problems* where Dewey addresses the artist’s role most directly, he suggests that the artist’s “presentation” of the results of social inquiry is the necessary prerequisite for the formation of public opinion precisely because it has the power to raise consciousness by effecting human desire, thought, emotion, perception and appreciation. He writes:

The freeing of the artist in literary presentation, in other words, is as much a precondition of the desirable creation of adequate opinion on public matters as is the freeing of social inquiry. Men’s conscious life of opinion and judgment often proceeds on a superficial and trivial plane. But their lives reach a deeper level. The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things, a flower, a gleam of moonlight, the song of a bird, not things rare and remote, are means with which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desire and thought. This process is art. Poetry, the drama, the novel, are proofs that the problem of presentation is not insoluble. Artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening it itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation.⁴⁸

Here and in similar passages, Dewey’s picture of the artist as presenter emerges: the artist presents the results of social inquiry by invoking signs/symbols to engage in consciousness-raising communication that moves broad swaths of everyday people at a deep, psychological level.⁴⁹ However, this construal of the artist as presenter of the results of social inquiry is puzzling for two reasons.

First, it leaves undertheorized the provenance and the character of the artist and the symbols/signs the artists invokes. Dewey’s statement of his semiotics of social inquiry provides too little attention to the origin, character, and situatedness of the signs/symbols to which

⁴⁷ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 183.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 183-4.

⁴⁹ The stakes of this “presentation” could not be higher for Dewey’s democratic theory. He maintains that no less than the future vitality of American democracy itself depends on artists effecting “full and moving communication” of the sort he has in mind. See *The Public and Its Problems*, 184.

imagines artists making recourse. At times, it almost seems as if Dewey pictures the artist more as an inventor, conjuring up meaningful signs/symbols to use to communicate the results of social inquiry out of sheer artistic genius.

This oversight suggests that Dewey fails to think historically and concretely enough about these artists and the role that their social, political, and cultural contexts plays in his democratic theory. Even granting him the general and theoretical terms to which he is committed in *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey leaves open important questions: Who are these artists? How are they able to meaningfully mobilize these signs/symbols to effect “full and moving communication” in a given instance? And what signs/symbols do they have available to them to invoke in the first place?

Second, and relatedly, Dewey’s picture of the artist as presenter is puzzling insofar as it treats the artist’s semiotic communication as both meaningful and motivating without providing a robust account of either its meaningfulness or its motivational capacity. As evidenced in the passage quoted at length above, Dewey fails to provide an account of how specifically the artist’s presentations can be consciousness-raising and effect desire, thought, emotion, perception, and appreciation in the way he imagines. Here too, he leaves important questions unanswered: how can the signs/symbols invoked by an artist be meaningful and motivating? And to whom?

I argue that Dewey’s discussion of artists “presenting” and “disseminating” the results of social inquiry reveals a crucial lacuna in both Dewey’s theory of democratic constitution and his semiotics of social inquiry: each lacks a corresponding theory of social interpretation that can account for both the provenance and character of the signs/symbols which artists invoke and well as their meaningful and motivational qualities. Indeed, Dewey fails to provide a theory of social interpretation even where his own theory both suggests and demands one. A stronger account

would portray the artist not as a presenter, but as an interpreter, and it would account for both the provenance and character of the signs/symbols which artists invoke as well as their meaningful and motivational qualities.

That said, Dewey's theory of democratic constitution does provide some clues about the provenance and character of the signs/symbols the artist invokes as well as their meaningful and motivational qualities. To observe these clues it is helpful to return to the key passage where he discusses the preconditions for transforming merely associated action into a "community." Here one observes that Dewey takes for granted the existence of a group of human beings engaging in some level of conjoint activity who therefore have common recourse to a set of sign/symbols that are both shared and whose meanings are mutually understood. He writes:

Combined activity happens among human beings; but when nothing else happens it passes as inevitably into some other mode of interconnected activity as does the interplay of iron and the oxygen of water. What takes place is wholly describable in terms of energy, or, as we say in the case of human interaction, of force. Only when there exist *signs or symbols* of activities and of their outcome can the flux be viewed as from without, be arrested for consideration and esteem, and be regulated...when phases of the process [of interaction] are represented by signs, a new medium is interposed. As symbols are related to one another, the important relations of a course of events are recorded and are preserved as meanings. Recollection and foresight are possible; the new medium facilitates calculation, planning, and a new kind of action which intervenes in what happens to direct its course in the interest of what is foreseen and desired.

Symbols in turn depend on and promote communication. The results of conjoint experience are considered and transmitted. Events cannot be passed from one to another, but meanings may be shared by means of signs. Wants and impulses are then attached to common meanings. They are thereby transformed into desires and purposes, which, since they implicate a common or mutually understood meaning, present new ties, converting a conjoint activity into a community of interest and endeavor. Thus there is generated what, metaphorically, may be termed a general will and social consciousness: desire and choice on the part of individuals in behalf of activities that, by means of symbols, are communicable and shared by all concerned. A community thus presents an order of energies transmuted into one of meanings which are appreciated and mutually referred by each to every other on the part of those engaged in combined action. "Force" is not eliminated but is transformed in use and direction by ideas and sentiments made possible by means of symbols.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Ibid., 153.

In this passage, Dewey suggests the existence of a Public, group of human beings engaging in combined activity who have the potential to become a true community defined by meanings (instead of mere energies, or “force”) provided that the individuals who engage in the combined activity can transform their individual wants and impulses into shared desires and purposes by the semiotic communication of shared meanings of the results of their “conjoint experience.” (He occasionally refers to this group as an “inchoate” and “unorganized” Public.)⁵¹ Here Dewey’s theory of democratic constitution begins to answer some of the above questions which his picture of the artist as presenter leaves unanswered. It does so in two ways.

First, it provides us with a clue to the provenance and character of the signs/symbols in question. It is this collective’s conjoint activity which generates and sustains the shared signs/symbols on which the artist might draw. Thus, it seems that Dewey imagines the artist and her communication as situated within a particular collective, with access to that collective’s signs and symbols. It is worth noting these signs’ and symbols’ historical, contingent, and inherited character, even if Dewey imagines the artist creatively retrieving and reappropriating old signs/symbols in a new way.

Second, Dewey’s theory of democratic constitution also suggests an account of the meaningfulness of the artists’ semiotic communication. Here too, Dewey suggests that the “inchoate” and “unorganized” Public provides the common reservoir of “shared meanings” against which the meaning of the artist’s semiotic communication reposes.⁵² Here too, one gains a slightly more detailed picture of the artist as situated in a group of people, making recourse to

⁵¹ Ibid., 109.

⁵² Dewey suggests that a Public can be in such an “inchoate” and “unorganized” state prior in two related, but distinct instances: First, prior to the formation of a corresponding community; Second, when a previously constituted community finds itself in a state of Eclipse (e.g. the situation which has created a “Great Society” in the United States).

the collective's shared signs/symbols of that group to meaningfully communicate the results of social inquiry/consequences of combined action to other members of that group in order to transform it into a true community.

However, Dewey's reliance on both signs/symbols and their meaningfulness in the transformation of a collective of conjointly acting individuals into a true, democratic community, invites a more robust theory of social interpretation. His theory both suggests the need for, but also undertheorizes the role of, artistic/inspired (re)interpretations in the constitution as well as the ongoing life and health of American democracy. And if Dewey's Public does indeed need such inspired (re)interpretations and interpreters who make explicit the social meaning of the consequences of combined action—beyond social scientists and artists—to make them on its behalf, then one needs to look outside of Dewey's theory to find them and a theory to account for their role. Where else does one find other interpreters who work to make plain the consequences of combined action, and communicate the meaning of those consequences through signs and symbols and thus to overcome Deweyan Eclipses of the Public? And where does one find a corresponding theory of social interpretation?

I turn to Michael Walzer's theory of social interpretation to find both. In the following chapter, I argue that one finds precisely such an interpreter and theory of interpretation in Walzer's figure of the social critic, and in a particular way the religious social critic. For this reason, in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I examine at length the work of four religious social critics, none of whom are social scientists or artists as Dewey imagines, but all of whom characteristically work to overcome Eclipses of the Public. However, before doing so, I need first to articulate the terms on which I understand each figure to be a social critic, and to consider how his social criticism relates to Dewey's picture of democracy. In short, I need to

offer a theory of interpretation and social criticism and to show how it fills the lacuna in Dewey's theory of democracy that I identified above. For this, I turn to Michael Walzer.

2. Michael Walzer, The Public, and Its Prophets

Introduction

Michael Walzer's theory of interpretation and social criticism is inspired and informed by the example of the Hebrew prophets and it offers Dewey's theory of the Public a corresponding theory of the Prophet-cum-social critic who works to make the Public explicit. I have argued that Dewey provides a useful theory of democracy for this study; his theory of the Public and a diagnosis of its problems offers a theory of democracy as consciousness that is sensitive to democracy's psychological and doxastic dimensions. But I have also argued that Dewey's theory falls short in its semiotic solution to the Public's problems because it fails to account for the role of interpretation in a number of key instances. I will now argue that Michael Walzer provides Dewey's theory of democracy a theory of interpretation that is well suited to supplement both Dewey's theory of democracy and my study of American democracy's political ethic of belief. Taken together, Walzer's and Dewey's theories combine to offer a picture of how Dewey's Public can give rise to social critics to speak on its behalf, and an account of how these Prophets of the Public can speak and act to overcome its Eclipse.

In what follows, I will show how Walzer's theory both complements and augments Dewey's political philosophy and also how it challenges Dewey to take interpretation more seriously. Walzer's theory of social criticism complements Dewey's vision of democracy to the degree that both thinkers are occupied with theorizing the gap between collectively held ideals and the reality of political and social life. Specifically, both thinkers are concerned with theorizing the ways in which such collectively held social and political ideals can affect human consciousness and human action in the face of diverse impediments; they are considering how that gap might be bridged and by whom. In this way, Dewey's theory of democracy and

Walzer's theory of interpretation and social criticism resonate in general aim and specific content, even as they differ in emphasis and method.

Walzer's theory of social criticism and interpretation also challenges and augments Dewey's theory of democracy by illuminating the ways in which the latter's theory overlooks the role of hermeneutic contributions of religious social critics. Yet, it also augments Dewey's theory by providing materials to compensate for that shortcoming. Walzer's theory does so in three ways: 1) where Dewey's political philosophy lacks a robust integration of the role of interpretation, particularly that articulated by religionists, Walzer's theory provides precisely such a theory of interpretation; 2) where Dewey's political philosophy is informed by a narrow picture of religion as necessarily supernaturalistic, Walzer's theory of interpretation is informed by a situated and hermeneutic picture of religion informed by the model of the Hebrew prophets; 3) as such, Walzer's picture of the "connected critic" provides a solution and alternative to the major dispositional problem which Dewey identifies with supernatural religion, namely, that it necessarily leads to dogmatism.

Yet, as will become evident, Walzer's theory is also not without its oversights. I argue that, yet again, each of the religious social critics treated in the following chapters challenge such a Walzerian model of social criticism to consider more fully the difficulties of practicing social criticism under conditions of pluralism, and particularly the kind of religious pluralism that increasingly characterizes American society. While Walzer suggests the vital importance of the social critic's membership in a community that shares social meanings, his theory insufficiently considers the reality of social critic's memberships in *multiple* communities—a point emphasized by this study's focus on *religious* social critics. Because he fails to theorize the significance of social critics' multiple memberships, he subsequently can neither distinguish

between those understandings we (all of us) do share and those which we (some of us) do not, nor can he relate them to each other.

However, this task is part of what I aim to accomplish in this study of American democracy's political ethic of belief. For this reason, Walzer's theory must be expanded to more robustly account for multiple memberships in overlapping communities, like those that inhabited by the religious social critic. To make plain this important modification, I will combine key insights from Walzer's and Dewey's theories to outline a theory of overlapping interpretations that accounts for religious social critic's multiple memberships. In doing so, I will isolate and identify all the necessary elements of a hermeneutics of political belief that I will use to guide my analyses of the examples provided by Dewey, Murray, Heschel, and King in the subsequent chapters.

Walzer's Social Critic

A Modern Social Prophet

Michael Walzer outlines his theory of interpretation and social criticism in two texts, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* and *The Company of Critics*.¹ He writes largely in response to critiques (notably by Ronald Dworkin) that the theory of justice as articulated in his influential book, *Spheres of Justice*, is a recipe for social conservatism and/or moral relativism.² For this reason, in *Interpretation and Social Criticism* and *Company of Critics*, Walzer aims to demonstrate the ways in which his theory is neither necessarily socially conservative nor

¹ Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

² Ronald Dworkin, "To Each His Own," *New York Review of Books*, April 14, 1983, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1983/04/14/to-each-his-own/>.

necessarily morally relativistic.³ To do so, he outlines a theory of interpretation and social criticism that aims to reconcile a specific historical community's shared meanings/understandings (a total embrace of which in moral theory suggests both social conservatism and a certain moral relativism) with the social practice of criticizing that very society (which he suggests limits the aforementioned conservative and relativistic tendencies).

In *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Walzer begins by critiquing what he takes to be two approaches or “paths” in moral philosophy—the path of discovery and the path of invention. He argues that, in each case, the critic represents a certain disconnect from received and concrete societies and moralities. In the case of “discovery,” the moral philosopher either receives revelation of or “discovers” and reveals to us some kind of objective moral truths.⁴ In the case of “invention,” the moral philosopher pretends to be able to stand “nowhere in particular” and constructs a new standard or set of standards meant to provide “a universal corrective” for the perceived problem of “all the different social moralities” in the world.⁵ Walzer critiques both endeavors as futile visions for social critique for three reasons. First, he warns that both options represent escape from actually existing morality because they view the moral world as something that is discovered or invented.⁶ Second, he also cautions that both paths are infinite and therefore endless: there are infinite numbers of possible discoveries and inventions, as well as infinite possible discoverers and inventors.⁷

Walzer reasons that both paths lead to what he calls the “third path” in moral philosophy, the path of interpretation: both discoveries and inventions need to be interpreted and thus to have

³ Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

interpreters. In this way, the path of interpretation recognizes those voices who provide an interpretation or judgment of not something discovered or invented, but rather something that preexists them, namely certain shared meanings or shared understandings of the “moral world” or way of life of the given community of which they are a part. “The claim of interpretation is simply this: that neither discovery nor invention is necessary because we already possess what they pretend to provide.”⁸ It is this path of interpretation that Walzer endorses for moral philosophy. In doing so, he suggests that moral philosophy must attend to the routine practice of social criticism, that practice which makes explicit and interprets the status quo in light of the already existing meaning(s) of the life that we already share.

For this reason, in both *Interpretation and Social Criticism* and *The Company of Critics*, Walzer argues for the central importance of “connected” social critics, those interpreters who engage in this practice with regard to their own community. Drawing inspiration from “the very earliest examples of social criticism” which he finds among the Hebrew prophets of ancient Israel, he offers a picture of the social critic as a marginal, ambiguously, and antagonistically connected member of her community who engages in the old, ordinary, and common social practice of critiquing her community in light of its own standards and values.⁹ Walzer understands the social critic as someone who models and exercises social authority by interpreting her community, its traditions, and its shared meanings/understandings in light of the moment in a way that highlights the problem that her community is falling short of its own ideals in a way that suggests a remedy.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁹ Ibid., 69.

¹⁰ Walzer distinguishes between internal and external social critics, though main focus of his analysis, and this dissertation, is on internal social critics. An internal social critic is a member of the community which they criticize, with full access to that community’s moral life and its shared meanings and understandings. An external social critic is not a member of the community which they criticize, and can only appeal to a “thin” or “minimal” morality or understanding, which itself is a function of the respective communities’ “thick” and “maximal” moralities. See his

To make clear social criticism's self-reflexive nature, Walzer offers the helpful metaphor of a mirror. He writes that our social critics hold up to us and our communities a figurative mirror which simultaneously "shows us to ourselves as we really are, all pretense shattered, stripped of our moral makeup, naked," and at the same time provide us "an account or interpretation of what, in our very souls, we [as a people] would like to be: all our high hopes and ideal images of self and society."¹¹ Social critics expose who we are in light of an interpretation of who we would like to be. They are our collective mirrors.

In this way, Walzer envisions the social critic to be what we might call a modern social prophet. His account suggests how the social critics can and do speak in an inspired and visionary way, not about the will of God, but about her own community's shared understandings and way of life, referring to inherited traditions while interpreting and revising them.¹² Her prophecy speaks not to and about a particular religious community, but to and about the society of which she is a part. She proclaims not God's judgments of us, but our judgments of ourselves. She is not God's prophet, but society's prophet.

A Prophet of the Public

As such, Walzer's social critic represents an actor ideally suited to give voice to Dewey's Public. As I will make plain, Walzer's social critic offers Dewey's political philosophy the Prophet of the Public which I argued that it lacks. Not only does Walzer's theory of interpretation and social criticism complement Dewey's political philosophy, but it also supplements it with a theoretical framework for conceptualizing Dewey's artist not as a presenter

discussion of Amos and Jonah in *Interpretation and Social Criticism* and also the argument of *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

¹¹ Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 231.

¹² Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 82.

but as an interpreter of the Public who works to make it explicit in the face of Eclipse. I now want to consider where Walzer's theory complements and supplements Dewey's political philosophy in turn.

Walzer's theory and Dewey's political philosophy complement each other in at least four ways: 1) they share a focus on responding to social problems, 2) they assert that the response to these problems is constitutive of our communities, 3) they similarly appeal to common meanings rooted in the communities of which we find ourselves a part, 4) and they share the view that national communities are particularly relevant on this score.

First, Walzer's focus on complaints parallels Dewey's focus on problems. Dewey discusses the problems facing American democracy (an Eclipse of the Public) and offers an account of who can best identify and respond to these social problems. In a similar way, Walzer parallels this focus on the identification of and response to social problems. He describes the kind of social criticism he has in mind most consistently and characteristically as a form of "complaint," arguing that social criticism is an ordinary, and old social practice of complaining about the circumstances of common life that is as "old as society itself." Indeed, Walzer asks "How can men and women ever have lived together without complaining about the circumstances of their common life?"¹³ In this way, Walzer makes clear that social critics are "specialists in complaint," experts in the practice of identifying social problems and bringing them to our attention.¹⁴ In his focus on social critics' response to perceived social problems through the social practice of complaint, Walzer parallels, to a striking degree, Dewey's focus on the artists' semiotic response to the problems the Public faces.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 66, 4.

Second, both thinkers offer theories of the constitution of community that understand a consciousness of collective existence to arise through the apprehension and consideration of such common problems. I have twice quoted and discussed Dewey's theory of democratic constitution at length above, so a brief summary should suffice: Dewey maintains that a group of people engaged in conjoint action is constituted as a true, democratic community when the individuals engaging in the combined activity transform their individual wants and impulses into shared desires and purposes by the semiotic communication of the shared meanings of the results of their "conjoint experience."¹⁵ This happens when they are able to perceive whether or not the results of their combined actions are problematic. Once they do, Dewey believes they can do something about it. In this sense, Dewey's theory of democratic constitution importantly hinges on the consciousness that arises in and through the response to shared problems.

For his part, Walzer suggests a theory of the constitution of community in *Company of Critics* that similarly turns on the self-awareness and mutual recognition that arises in and through a people's response to shared problems. Characteristically, he articulates his theory of constitution in terms of the social practice of complaining about the circumstances of common life. He opens the book with the following characterization of the importance of complaint in the life of a society:

Social criticism must be as old as society itself. How can men and women ever have lived together without complaining about the circumstances of their common life? Complaint is one of the elementary forms of self-assertion, and the response to complaint is one of the elementary forms of mutual recognition. When what is at issue is not existence itself but social existence, being-for-others, then complaint is proof enough: I complain, therefore I am. We discuss the complaint, therefore we are.¹⁶

¹⁵ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 153.

¹⁶ Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 3.

Here, Walzer notes that an important part of the constitution of any society is the self-assertive practice of complaining about what we take to be a problem and the mutual recognition involved in responding to others' complaints. Walzer suggests that, in becoming conscious of the fact that our fellow perceives there to be a problem, as well as in the practice of responding to her complaint, we constitute ourselves as a community. As he puts it: "We discuss the complaint, therefore we are." In this way, Walzer's theory of constitution shares with Dewey's an emphasis on the importance of perceiving and consciously responding to common problems.

Moreover, both theorists maintain that their respective theories of constitution provide constructive alternatives to the organization of collective life through the use of brute force. Dewey maintains that his theory of constitution offers an alternative to the organization of a collective by force by transforming that force into something else. He writes that:

A community thus presents an order of energies transmuted into one of meanings which are appreciated and mutually referred by each to every other on the part of those engaged in combined action. "Force" is not eliminated but is transformed in use and direction by ideas and sentiments made possible by means of symbols.¹⁷

By using signs/symbols to communicate the results of "conjoint experience," Dewey maintains that a collective can be organized by the conscious and mutual meanings of a true community, instead of the brute force which organizes mere "conjoint experience." Similarly, Walzer maintains that the practice of social criticism—when properly conducted—offers an alternative to the use of force in social constitution and reconstitution.¹⁸ The social critic avails herself to all of the cultural and social resources available in order to levy her criticism in terms that are intelligible and meaningful to her audience, of which she is a part. She avoids use of force

¹⁷ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 153.

¹⁸ Walzer specifies that it is specifically social criticism "in the national-popular mode" which achieves this, see *Company of Critics* p. 235. See also the below discussion of National-Popular Criticism.

because her criticism is aimed to convince, not coerce, her fellows; and she avoids forcing anything on her fellows which is not already their own.

Third, Dewey's and Walzer's theories complement each other because they both understand the kind of social criticism they have in mind to be grounded by the appeal to shared meanings. Above, I discussed at length the place of shared meanings in Dewey's theory of democratic constitution. Recall that it is to these shared meanings of an "inchoate" or "unorganized" Public to which an artist's "full and moving communication" appeals in order to transform mere conjoint activity of a group into a self-conscious democratic community whose members are aware of the common life of the collective and their place(s) in it. For Dewey, these shared meanings are the backdrop against which the artist's meaningful communication—her "presentation" of the consequences of social inquiry—reposes. For Walzer, these shared meanings provide both the subject and object of interpretation; they underpin the "moral world" or "moral culture" in which the social critic lives and speaks, and which she interprets. The shared meaning of a community's life together, the shared understandings that underpin their "common complaints," plays a crucial role in Walzer's theory of interpretation and social criticism.

This shared emphasis on the collective life of a group or community highlights the other important aspect of this third point of complementarity between Dewey's and Walzer's theories: both Dewey and Walzer understand these shared meanings to be functions of the collectives of which we find ourselves a part. I have already discussed the extent to which Dewey's theory of democratic constitution assumes that shared meanings are produced by and thus accompany conjoint action, even when rather "unorganized" and "inchoate." For his part, Walzer similarly understands the shared meanings which the social critic references in articulating her criticism to

arise from the shared “moral world” and “tradition of moral discourse” that arises in and through the life of a concrete historical collective. He makes this point clear when he argues that the abstract moral question “what is the right thing to do?” is not, when one looks at its phenomenology, really a question about any “existing and particular morality” in a general sense. Rather, he suggests that “its real subject is the meaning of the particular moral life shared by the protagonists.”¹⁹ On this understanding, moral discourse and social criticism are universal phenomena that, however universal they are, only arise and function within concrete, historical, and particular collectives. The argument simply cannot be about moral life in general; it’s always about *our* life together. Thus, it is precisely the community itself, the collective of which the social critic and her fellows are members are a part, that undergirds and gives rise to the shared meanings upon which the social critic references in her criticism.

The fourth and final point of complementarity between Walzer’s theory of interpretation and social criticism and Dewey’s theory of democracy is a shared esteem for the role of national communities. Where Dewey’s theory assumes the relevance of the national unit in its focus on the challenges facing *American* democracy, Walzer’s theory explicitly endorses Antonio Gramsci’s notion of the “national-popular” mode to specify that the most effective form of social criticism is that which is carried out in terms of the nation. In *The Company of Critics*, Walzer argues that the most effective critics speak the language of the “folk” and operate in the national-popular mode:

I take this to mean, national in form, popular in content, or better, national in idiom, popular in argument. The ideal critic in this mode is loyal to men and women in trouble—oppressed, exploited, impoverished, forgotten—but he sees these people and their troubles and the possible solution to their troubles within the framework of national history and culture. Nation, not class, is the relevant unit, even when the critic is most closely attuned to class. He can express working-class aspiration, for example, only if he realizes that full membership in the national community is what most workers aspire to.

¹⁹ Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism.*, 23.

The pull of the common culture is powerful, and here criticism does not require resistance. On the contrary: the critic must speak the language of the country, ordinary language; and whatever his own sophistication and learning, he must maintain some continuity with the traditions of common complaint...If the critic is to speak for his fellows, he must also speak with them, and when what he says sounds unpatriotic, he has to insist on his own deeper patriotism.²⁰

Walzer suggests the power of a social critic's appeal to a nation's standards, self-understanding, history, and culture—one might say, its national ethos. In doing so, he suggests that the nation and the national can function as a point of reflection and a mode of discourse that provides shared standards and enables the social critic the benefit of certain insider status but does so in a way that facilitates rather than hampers her social criticism.

Walzer's picture of the social critic not only complements Dewey's political theory in these four ways; it also supplements it. Specifically, Walzer's theory provides the Public the needed interpreter and provides Dewey's political philosophy the missing theory of interpretation. In doing so, Walzer's theory augments Dewey's political philosophy on a number of points and also helps illuminate the ways that the statements of social critics—and specifically religious social critics—contribute to overcoming Eclipses of the Public and simultaneously provide evidence of American Democracy's political ethic of belief. It does so in particular in its detailed theorization of 1) the social position of the social critic and her motives for criticism, 2) the critical language(s) in which she speaks, 3) her audience, 4) the nature of the practice of social criticism itself, and 5) her authority. On these five points, Walzer's picture of the social critic as imminent interpreter answers the questions which Dewey's picture of the artist as presenter eschews and his political philosophy leaves open more generally: Walzer addresses who can be a social critic, what's involved in that practice, on whose authority social critics rely,

²⁰ Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 233-34.

where the signs/symbols of social criticism come from, and how and to whom the signs/symbols social criticism can be used to communicate meaningfully.

First, Walzer provides a much more detailed account of who can be a social critic and on what grounds. Walzer offers a picture of the social critic's social position as one that is connected to but marginal in the community. On the one hand, Walzer argues that the critic must be connected to her community for her criticism to be intelligible, meaningful, and convincing, as well as to have any real motivation to levy such criticism. His basic point is that critical principles arise internally to a given "moral world" or moral discourse and are only meaningful within that discourse. As he puts it: "Moral philosophy here is understood as a reflection upon the familiar, a reinvention of our own homes. This is, however, a critical reflection, reinvention with a purpose; we are to correct our more groping intuitions by reference to a model we construct out of our more confident intuitions."²¹ Therefore, the social critic must be somehow *connected* to that discourse, and able to avail herself to that discourse to engage in the practice of social criticism. Social criticism can only be articulated with the authority of someone who is a member of the tradition or community that is being criticized and is fluent in the necessary "critical languages" relevant to that community.²² As he concisely puts it: "The critic is one of us."²³

The social critic's membership in her community could not be more crucial for Walzer, because the connection keeps the social critic from distancing herself too much from the community. Walzer warns sharply about the danger of "disconnected" or "asocial" criticism. Such an "asocial" or "disconnected" critic lets the "critical distance" in relation to her own

²¹ Ibid., 17.

²² Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 20-22; *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 37-39, 60-61.

²³ Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 39.

community becomes too great: there is a point where her criticism becomes wholly “disconnected” from the “local understandings” which characterize the actually existing community that is the object of critique.²⁴ When this happens, the criticism becomes neither intelligible or relevant to the community; the critic has left the realm of shared meanings. It is at this point that Walzer thinks such critics face the great temptation of disconnected criticism: the temptation to, in the absence of shared understandings to which they can appeal, use coercive power in order to apply their, now foreign, invented and/or discovered moral standards to the community. At this point social criticism ceases to resemble social criticism, and begins to look like tyranny, domination, or war.

Despite the importance of the social critic’s connection to her community, she must also be marginal in it. Walzer argues that the social critic achieves the “inches” of critical distance necessary for levying her criticism not by somehow becoming radically detached from her community, like those “disconnected” critics whom Walzer criticizes, but by becoming marginal *within* her community. It is from this marginal position that the social critic has all the benefit of being a connected member of the community (motivation, authority, necessary critical languages), as well as the “inches” of critical distance needed to expose the gap between the reality of social life in a community and that community’s ideals. The tension between this connectivity and marginality is crucial to Walzer’s picture because it enables the social critic to be both connected and critical without making recourse to principles external to the shared life of a given community. On this point, Walzer’s account suggests that Dewey’s artist must be similarly a connected, yet marginal, member of her community.

²⁴ Ibid., 65.

Second, Walzer addresses where the signs/symbols that social critics use to articulate their social criticism come from. He suggests that the origin of these signs and symbols lies in the languages and discourses that we use in our common life together. In *Company of Critics*, Walzer discusses this under the rubric of “Languages of Criticism.”²⁵ These signs/symbols come from a variety of “languages.” Importantly, Walzer maintains that the “primary or natural language of social criticism is that of the folk,” due to the fact that the more esoteric the language of the social critic becomes, the less impactful her social criticism is in society.²⁶ If she articulates “common complaints” in a highly specialized language, then she obscures for us what she articulates instead of clarifying it.²⁷ Additionally, Walzer suggests that social critics may choose to speak in any number of critical languages available in her community. For example, the languages of “God or Reason (or Reason-in-History) or Empirical Reality” might be available to her and she may choose to use them to levy her criticism. Regarding the specific task of choosing a critical language or critical languages, Walzer argues that in each case, “the choice of a critical language depends...on the authority the critic wants to claim or thinks he has to claim in order to be heard. And that depends on his relation to his audience.” However, for the reasons mentioned above, Walzer’s primary interest is in the language of “mainstream criticism, that is, with critics who stand sufficiently close to their audience and are sufficiently confident of their standing so that they are not driven to use highly specialized or esoteric languages.”²⁸ On this point, Walzer’s account suggests that Dewey’s artist must make recourse to the signs and symbols that are broadly present and meaningful in her community.

²⁵ Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 9-12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Third, and closely related, Walzer addresses how and to whom the signs/symbols of social criticism can be used to communicate meaningfully. He stresses again and again that the social critic invokes the “critical languages” that she knows will be meaningful to her audience. She knows this with certainty because she is always also a member of her own audience. The social is both the subject and object of interpretation, and the critic is a (albeit somewhat marginal) member of the society under scrutiny. On this point, Walzer’s account suggests that Dewey’s artist must speak to and with her fellows.

Fourth, Walzer addresses what is involved in social criticism as a social practice, namely interpretation. He clarifies that the social critic does not use signs/symbols to present content to an audience, but rather invokes signs/symbols in a way that makes the content of such semiotic communication meaningful to her audience. As such, social criticism is a “cultural practice of affirmation and elaboration.”²⁹ The social critic *interprets* the status quo in terms of both latent and explicit social meanings that arise in the course of the common life. She is the one of us who holds up a mirror so that we can see who we really are, but also interprets who we currently are in such a way that we can see ourselves in light of who we want to be. She is the one of us who points out the distance between our shared ideals and our shared reality. On this point, Walzer’s account suggests that Dewey’s artist must not only present the results of social inquiry but also interpret them.

Fifth and finally, Walzer addresses the social critic’s authority. Indeed, the previous four points already suggest that the critic’s authority is related to her connected but marginal position within the relevant society, the recourse to the critical languages which that position provides, and the ability to engage in meaningful interpretation of a community’s shared ideals that this

²⁹ Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 40.

position facilitates. All of these factors enable the social critic to model and exercise a certain cultural and social authority in her community. As Walzer puts it, the “effective authority” is that of her fellow “members of the interpretive community.”³⁰ She holds up her interpretations for their approval.³¹ Her authority is a social authority that is practiced, enacted, and accorded in the context of the social practice of criticism. On this point, Walzer’s account suggests that Dewey’s artist practices and exercises a certain cultural and social authority, which adds strength to her criticism.

On these points, Walzer’s account of interpretation and social criticism not only complements Dewey’s political philosophy in general, but also supplements his semiotics of social inquiry with a robust account of an artist as an interpreter: a social critic who works from a slightly marginal position within the community to speak and interpret for her fellows the consequences of their collective actions in light of their shared ideals, meanings, and understandings. In doing so, it provides Dewey’s theory of the Public and his diagnosis of the Problems it faces with a much more robust constructive solution: A Prophet of the Public.

The Religious Social Critic

Inspiration and Challenge

As I stated earlier, I want to consider specifically religious social criticism and the evidence that statements from religious social critics might provide us about the beliefs democracy requires of its members. Therefore, in developing the hermeneutics of political belief necessary for carrying out this study, it is crucial that I am clear about how Walzer’s theory of interpretation and social criticism assists Dewey’s political philosophy in accounting for

³⁰ Ibid., 30n.

³¹ Ibid., 30.

specifically religiously-inspired social criticism, as well as the limits of Walzer's theory on that score. Two points prove relevant regarding religion: Walzer's theory of interpretation and social criticism suggests the particular relevance of the appeal to a community's or nation's shared religious understandings and yet fails to sufficiently account for the reality of contemporary religious pluralism and the role of religion in articulating social criticism.

On the first point, one must note that the fact that Walzer's reflections are themselves inspired by the practices of ancient religionists suggests that Walzer sees religion as historically, if not conceptually, connected to the practice of social criticism. He also understands religions to be important contributors to the stock of cultural material that pre-exists any social critic in her society and on which she draws. Yet, his reliance on these examples from ancient religionists also sneaks an assumption into his constructive proposal (whose subject matter is not ancient prophecy but contemporary moral philosophy and contemporary critical theory): that of a relatively homogenous, stable, coherent, and discrete cultural, religious, social, political and moral community—in this case, the Israelite people. In doing so, Walzer's theory assumes a strong connection between peoplehood/nationhood and religious uniformity.

The ancient Israelites indeed had their own internal forms of diversity, as does every community, but in *Interpretation and Social Criticism* Walzer does not treat them this way. Instead, he argues that the idea of a nation or "people" underlies the force of the prophets' criticism, and that this peoplehood is connected to the community's relationship to God. He writes:

The paradigmatic task of the prophets is to judge the people's relations with one another (and with "their" God), to judge the internal character of their society, which is exactly what Jonah does not do. Prophetic teaching, writes Lindblom more accurately, "is characterized by the principle of solidarity. Behind the demand for charity and justice...lies the idea of the *people*, the people as an organic whole, united by election and

covenant”—singled out, we might say, by a peculiar history...their [the prophets’] focus is always on the fate of the covenanted community as a whole.³²

Notice that the people in question are bound not only by a shared history, but also by their “election and covenant”—their relationship to and with the God of Israel. In this way, Walzer’s decision to invoke the paradigm of the Hebrew prophets bakes into his theory the assumption that a shared religious orientation is important *constitutionally* for the community of which the social critic is a part, the community whose shared understandings form the basis of her criticism. The implication seems to be that it is easier to share moral understandings and bring them to bear in and on society when that society is relatively homogeneous with respect to religion. That is certainly true as far as it goes.

However, it does not go very far with regard to American society because one cannot neatly assume the religious homogeneity of the American nation or people, as Walzer does in the case of the ancient Israelites. This observation suggests one clear limitation to Walzer’s reliance on ancient figures as the inspiration for his theory of interpretation and social criticism, namely that the cultural, religious, social, political and moral contexts in which they articulated their criticism are largely foreign to our own. They did not live and criticize in a context of contemporary religious pluralism. Walzer does; so do we. In this dissertation, the religious social critics I treat in the following chapters embody the challenge that the religious pluralism in the United States poses to Walzer’s theory.

Pluralism and Social Criticism

Despite this assumption of a homogenous national community underlying much of the analysis in *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Walzer is otherwise keenly aware of the reality

³² Ibid., 80.

of pluralism, both internal and external to the American nation, and he treats the topic using a number of frameworks across many of his writings. Therefore, attention to his statements on pluralism helps to illuminate both the limits and possibilities his theory of interpretation and social criticism as a framework for studying American democracy's political ethic of belief. Walzer's attention to the dynamics of pluralism is evident in at least three areas: his theory of thick and thin moral codes, his discussion of "what it means to be an American," and his framework of "critical pluralism."³³

First, Walzer clearly recognizes international, or external, pluralism. He takes the reality of the plurality of national communities in the world so seriously that develops a two-track moral theory to account for it in *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*. In this moral theory, moral terms have dual meanings and dual purposes, one appropriate to the national context ("at home") and the other appropriate to the international context ("abroad"). Walzer argues that moral terms have a "thick," "maximal" meaning, appropriate to and arising from the specific and particular conditions of the local, national domain and also a "thin," "minimal" meaning, appropriate to and arising from overlaps between multiple thick moralities in the international arena.³⁴ (It is worth noting in this context that the social critic characteristically speaks in the terms and domain of one society's "thick" or "maximal" morality.) Not only does

³³ Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); *What It Means to Be an American: Essays on the American Experience* (New York: Marsilio Publishers Corp., 1996); *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). Walzer's influential theory of justice in *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) is structured around the key assumption, as the subtitle suggests, that pluralism is internal to our moral communities. The pluralism there, however, regards the existence of multiple "spheres" of communal life, each of which has its own proper distributive principle for the distribution of social goods. Thus, Walzer's theory is concerned with pluralism of social meanings (e.g. meanings of terms like justice) within one moral community, and not concerned with other aspects of the plural constitution of that community (e.g. religious diversity).

³⁴ Walzer develops this theory extensively in *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), see especially Chapter 1, pp. 1-19. It also appears in *Interpretation and Social Criticism* in his discussion of the Hebrew prophets Amos and Jonah, see "The Prophet as Social Critic" pp. 69-94.

Walzer's response to the challenge international pluralism poses to moral theory demonstrate attention to the matter of pluralism as such, his suggestion that the "thin" morality results from *overlap* between plural, "thick" moralities foreshadows and suggests the framework that I will use to enable his theory to account for religious pluralism internal to the United States.³⁵ I discuss this framework at length in the sections below.

Second, Walzer also clearly recognizes the reality of *intranational*, or internal, pluralism, the diversity internal to our "thick" national communities. Walzer addresses such internal pluralism in his discussion of "hyphenated Americans" in *What It Means to Be an American* and in *The Company of Critics* under the rubric of "critical pluralism."³⁶ In both cases, Walzer goes some distance toward theorizing the dynamics of religious pluralism and connecting this theory to his broader theory of social criticism. However, in both cases, he fails to sufficiently explore the connection between his pluralistic theory of American citizenship and his theory of critical pluralism. Specifically, he fails to consider the implications that the social critic's multiple memberships have on the practice of social criticism itself. I will briefly consider each discussion in turn.

In *What It Means to Be an American*, Walzer collects four essays which he considers to represent his thoughts on "the politics of difference in the United States," specifically "ethnic and religious difference."³⁷ Thus, it is in this text that Walzer most directly addresses the specific kind of pluralism that is germane to the religious social critics treated in this dissertation. Across the essays, Walzer outlines a pluralistic vision of American politics in which American

³⁵ Walzer discusses the moral minimum as resulting from the identification of "overlapping outcomes" of diverse historical process and social practices in many countries and cultures. He also discusses this minimalism's dependence on "overlapping expectations" between our expectations of our fellows' behavior, their expectations of our behavior, and their expectations about their own behavior (*Thick and Thin*, 15, 17).

³⁶ Walzer, *What It Means to Be An American*, 36-49; *The Company of Critics*, 16-19.

³⁷ Walzer, *What It Means to Be an American*, 3.

citizenship functions to both incorporate the diverse ethnic and religious groups which characterize American civil society into an overarching political structure and also preserve these groups' integrity and autonomy. In the titular essay, originally published in the Fall 1990 edition of *Social Research* under the title "What Does It Mean to Be an American?", Walzer sketches a model of doubly-hyphenated citizenship, which he argues captures the specific nature of the relationship between American political and religious/ethnic memberships.

He claims that Americans understand themselves in hyphenated terms: as Irish-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Jewish-Americans. Here the term before the hyphen denotes an ethnic/religious/cultural membership and identity and the term following the hyphen denotes a certain political membership and identity. However, for Americans, this hyphenation is not a simple summation or agglutination of one discrete kind of membership (ethnic/religious/cultural) with another (political). Rather, Walzer argues that the hyphenation is "doubled" in Americans' self-understandings. Both one's ethnic/religious/cultural identity *and* one's political allegiance are fully hyphenated. By this designation, Walzer means that:

it is not the case that Irish-Americans, say, are culturally Irish and politically American, as the pluralists claim...Rather, they are culturally Irish-American and politically Irish-American. Their culture has been significantly influenced by American culture; their politics is still, both in style and substance, significantly ethnic. With them, and with every ethnic and religious group except the American-Americans, hyphenation is doubled. It remains true, however, that what all the groups have in common is most importantly their citizenship and what most differentiates them, insofar as they are still differentiated, is their culture.³⁸

For Walzer, then, such double-hyphenation names the way Americans' self-understandings involve complex and mutually constitutive relations between ethnic/religious/cultural membership and identity and American's political membership and identity. He suggests that, while the two terms on either side of the hyphen remain distinct, the hyphenation affords a

³⁸ Ibid., 46.

combining which allows Americans' self-understanding to become more than the sum of its parts. As Walzer puts it: "The hyphen works, when it is working, more like a plus sign." One is always Jewish *and* American, but also American *and* Jewish. In each respect, one is always similar *and* different, different *and* similar. Similar in one's difference, yet different in one's similarity. In this way, Walzer's theory of double-hyphenation helps us to describe both that which is most shared (citizenship) and that which is most different (ethnicity/religion/culture).

One key implication of this double-hyphenation is that American citizenship is what Walzer calls "anonymous": it doesn't require a full commitment to American (or to any other) nationality. He claims that one of the key characteristics of the American political tradition is that individuals are not compelled to choose between the first or second term; ethnic/religious/cultural heritage, membership, and identity are not perceived to be mutually exclusive with American citizenship. In fact, though he recognizes that one term may be dominant in a given person's life or self-understanding, Walzer argues that that "an ethnic-American is someone who can, in principle, live his spiritual life as he chooses, *on either side of the hyphen*. In this sense, American citizenship is indeed anonymous, for it doesn't require a full commitment to American (or to any other) nationality. The distinctive national culture that Americans have created doesn't underpin, it exists alongside of, American politics."³⁹

In its anonymity, American citizenship and its national culture, Walzer suggests, has functioned and might continue to function to integrate people of diverse ethnic and religious heritages in the United States into one overarching political structure and tradition. He maintains that "the adjective 'American' named, and still names, a politics that is relatively unqualified by religion or nationality or, alternatively, that is qualified by so many religions and nationalities as

³⁹ Ibid., 44-45.

to be free from any one of them. It is this freedom that makes it possible for America's oneness to encompass and protect its manyness."⁴⁰ And this is what Walzer believes "it means to be an American." He argues that having the self-understanding of an American involves an acceptance of this "manyness," including the messiness and incoherence such pluralism involves for American politics, and being "more or less content with it."⁴¹

While his picture of social criticism is not the focus of the essays in *What It Means to Be an American*, he does at one point begin to relate his understanding of a pluralist American citizenship to his broader picture of social criticism. In these essays, Walzer understands American society to be composed of various ethnic and religious groups, each of which he suggests has a "core" and a "periphery." Those at the "core" he refers to "activists and believers" and those who are on the "periphery" he describes as "passive members or followers, lost, as it were, in a wider America."⁴² He distinguishes these groups in order to make the point that Americans are free to choose to live their lives, or parts of their lives, more closely aligned with the "core" or more closely aligned with the "periphery." We choose how closely we hold our heritages, memberships, and identities, and or how much we distance ourselves from them in favor of the more general American culture. Furthermore, his word choice for those identified more closely with their ethnic or religious groups is revealing. The language of "activists and believers" suggests that the religious social critics who are the object of are study would be those at the religious or ethnic group's "core," that is, closely identified with their religious group. Indeed, as will become clear in the following chapters, this position of an embrace of their religious membership and identity describes their self-understandings well.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 31.

⁴¹ Ibid., 49.

⁴² Ibid., 48.

In these ways, Walzer's picture of double-hyphenation suggests that the "anonymous" character of American citizenship and the plural constitution of American society combine to provide all the necessary conditions to give rise to social critics—including religious social critics—who embrace their particular religious or ethnic heritage and identity in a way that enables them to bring it to bear on American politics and the American political culture. However, in *What It Means to Be An American*, Walzer leaves the details of *how* exactly such social criticism might be possible in a *plurally* constituted polity, especially social criticism whose object is the polity as such, undiscussed.

Walzer more explicitly addresses the connection between such pluralism internal to the national community and social criticism when he outlines his framework of "critical pluralism" in *The Company of Critics*. He uses the term "critical pluralism" to denote the empirical fact that that each "modern democratic society" consists in a "confabulation of critics," each of whom vies for our attention. (Among these are, presumably, the "activists and believers" mentioned above.) He maintains that it is simply the case that, given such conditions, we disagree and that we discuss our disagreements. He argues that there are multiple critics, diverse critical languages, and no overarching "True Doctrine" to which one Hercules of a social critic can ever ultimately and decisively appeal, otherwise the practice of social criticism would simply end.⁴³ Yet, it has not. Instead, we criticize, we confabulate, and the beat goes on. Thus, Walzer theorizes the internal pluralism of our national communities by imagining them to comprise a "confabulation of critics," who speak different "critical languages" to make their appeals; some of them we support, and some of them we do not.

⁴³ Ibid.

Furthermore, Walzer maintains that this “critical pluralism” also operates internal to individuals, thus enabling self-criticism.⁴⁴ He analogizes the “critical pluralism” of the individual self to the constitution of society described above: both societies and selves are confabulations of critics.⁴⁵ Walzer argues that selves constitute such confabulations because they are “self-divided,” or “internally differentiated,” in three ways: the self is divided according to its 1) multiple social roles (doctor, patient, teacher, student, worker, professional, merchant, etc.), 2) multiple identities (family, nation, *religion*, gender, political commitment, etc.), and 3) multiple ideals, principles and values.⁴⁶ Walzer imagines each of our differentiations as one social critic who is speaking to us, whom we evaluate, and to whom we choose to listen or ignore. And we all incorporate these internal differentiations into a “wider selfhood,” with ourselves at the center.⁴⁷

It is in this discussion of “critical pluralism”—both in the context of the nation and the context of the self—that Walzer comes closest to a discussion of the issues that religious pluralism and the practice of religious social criticism raises for American democracy. In the context of the national community, his conception of “critical pluralism” recognizes a plurality of social critics internal to communities, and also recognizes that different members of a community have different loyalties to different critics.⁴⁸ Furthermore, in his discussion of the critical languages these critics might use, Walzer references the role of religious signs and symbols in a society characterized by “critical pluralism.” Religious signs and symbols, or as Walzer puts it, “God or Reason (or Reason-in-History) or Empirical Reality,” appear as one among many philosophical, metaphysical, moral and/or religious “languages” that social critics

⁴⁴ Walzer, *Thick and Thin*, 85-104.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴⁸ Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 17.

use to articulate their criticism. In the context of the individual self, his conception of “critical pluralism” recognizes pluralism internal to selves based on one’s roles, identities, and the plural moralities that may accompany them. In each of these ways, Walzer’s theory of “critical pluralism” suggests both the reality of and importance of what I have been calling a person’s multiple memberships, including memberships in religious communities, and the roles, identities, and moralities that may accompany them.

However, throughout his discussion of social criticism in all of these texts, Walzer assumes, but fails to sufficiently discuss the fact that we share some communities and meanings while we do not share others. He fails to sufficiently draw out the implications for his theory, for example, of the fact that we have common “languages” as well as foreign “languages” amongst ourselves, and perhaps even internal to ourselves. Indeed, both his reflections on doubly-hyphenated Americans and “critical pluralism” only beg the question about the internal pluralism that they presume to answer. Because it assumes the reality of multiple memberships in internally diverse communities, Walzer’s theory needs to be able to distinguish and relate the meanings and communities we *do share* with those that *are only shared by some of us*.

To his credit, Walzer comes close to doing this in a few places. In *Thick and Thin*, Walzer’s two-track moral theory begins to relate such shared and unshared meanings, though in a different context and on a different scale. Insofar as Walzer’s theory recognizes both “thick” and “thin” meanings of moral terms, it relates the meanings and communities we do share (thin, minimal meanings in the international arena) to meanings and communities that are only shared by some of us (thick, maximal meanings in the national community).⁴⁹ This paradigm is evocative, and parallels in many ways my own theory of “overlapping interpretations” below.

⁴⁹ I believe this is a genuine insight, and one that informs my theory of overlapping interpretations in the following section.

However, Walzer's analysis is focused on applying this insight to the international arena, not the national.

In *What it Means to Be An American*, Walzer's theory of double-hyphenation similarly begins to name and relate those meanings and communities Americans understand themselves to share to those they do not, insofar as it helps to distinguish and relate religious and ethnic communities which are shared by some, with the tradition of American politics and its national culture, which is shared (at least in principle) by all. However, in the case of double-hyphenation, both the syntactical metaphor of hyphenation and the spatial metaphor of core-periphery discussed above fail to illuminate and instead equivocate on the relationship between that which is shared and that which is not. Walzer suggests little more than that ethnicity/religion/culture on the one hand, and politics on the other, *are* both related and yet distinct. However, he fails to elaborate on the nature and mechanics of this relation. Indeed, in both of these instances, Walzer fails to sufficiently connect his insights about the plurality of social meanings and diversity of communities to the figure of the social critic or to her project of social criticism.

Moreover, one observes this same oversight in the figure of the individual social critic. Walzer fails to apply the insights of his "divided-self" to the figure of the social critic. Here too, Walzer fails to draw out the implications of the pluralism *internal* to the individual social critic for his theory of social criticism. Namely, he fails to note that social critics' interpretations are often, if not necessarily, overlapping interpretations, which draw on and reference the multiple memberships which characterize their doubly-hyphenated, "divided-selves." In short, because Walzer's theory of social criticism and interpretation lacks a sufficiently robust appreciation for the social critic's multiple memberships—though in other places he robustly recognizes these

memberships—it fails to consider the implications of those multiple memberships for her criticism and for his theory. I aim to better integrate and relate these insights below.

In a nation whose motto is *E Pluribus Unum*, it is a mistake for the social theorist to focus on the *Unum* at the expense of the *Pluribus*, or to assume that either *Unum* or the *Pluribus* has to win-out in a social theory. Walzer’s theories of “thick and thin,” of double-hyphenation, and of “critical pluralism,” admirably aim to sustain the tension between the one and the many endemic to democratic political theory. However, because Walzer fails to adequately distinguish between and relate those understandings we (all of us) do share to those which we (some of us) do not, I argue that his theory would benefit from a more robust account of multiple memberships in overlapping communities, like those that inhabited by the religious social critic. What Walzer needs is a theory of overlapping interpretations.

Indeed, each of the examples that I will consider in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation provides evidence that one singular social critic can and does appeal to the semiotic resources of many of her communities simultaneously. To use Walzer’s metaphor, these examples provide evidence that the religious social critic speaks multiple “critical languages” at the same time, including characteristically the language of her religious tradition. Yet, as helpful as Walzer’s linguistic metaphor may be, it is limited by the fact that, when it comes to actual (not metaphorical) languages, we can only speak one in any given moment. Should the polyglot start to speak in German and Arabic simultaneously, the result would not be scathing social criticism, just a headache for the polyglot and confusion for everyone else, including both German and Arabic speakers. Yet, this is precisely what the religious social critic does; she “speaks” two “critical languages” simultaneously, often seamlessly integrating them with each other. In the chapters that follow, I will demonstrate that the social critics in question do effectively speak (at

least) two “critical languages:” that of American democracy and that of their own religious tradition. However, because of the limitations of Walzer’s linguistic metaphor for capturing these dynamics, I will consider the appealing alternative that Jeffrey Stout offers in his conception of “moral bricolage” and then suggest a more adequate framework.

A Moral Bricoleur?

Jeffrey Stout’s discussion in *Ethics After Babel* of the nature of moral disagreement in terms of the diverse “languages of morals” provides a helpful stepping stone from Walzer’s conceptualization of pluralism in terms of “critical languages” to the more robust framework of overlapping interpretations which I will outline in the following section. Specifically, Stout’s conception of moral bricolage illuminates many of the dynamics involved in referencing and combining multiple “critical languages” simultaneously in the way religious social critics do. For this reason, it helps us make some headway in reimagining Walzer’s social critic as a religious social critic. Yet, Stout’s theory, too, provides an insufficient framework for this study because it ultimately fails to be sufficiently self-aware about the nature of the activity of moral bricolage itself, namely: that it is one of overlapping interpretation.

In *Ethics After Babel*, Stout adopts Lévi-Strauss’ notion of a “bricoleur” and adapts it for his theory of “moral bricolage.” He does so largely to make a similar point to the one that Walzer makes in *Interpretation and Social Criticism*: that moral philosophy is neither a matter of invention or discovery, but rather a matter of “moral bricolage” that consists in some of each.⁵⁰ Stout argues that the moral bricoleur makes recourse to whatever conceptual resources are available (i.e. moral “languages,” “fragments” of moral languages, or “vocabularies”), sorts

⁵⁰ Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 74.

through them, and “arranges some of them into a structured whole...and ends with a moral language ready to use, possibly quite a novel one.”⁵¹ Crucially, what determines which pieces the moral bricoleur chooses to keep and discard, as well as how he cobbles them together, is their ability to solve whatever problem or dilemma is at hand in the bricoleur’s concrete moral world and community. In this way, the moral bricoleur draws on the moral resources she has at hand to put forward new “candidates for truth,” which are propositions both invented by the “creative human effort of moral bricolage,” and whose truth value is discovered as one comes to know them as true.⁵²

Stout’s conception of moral bricolage begins to capture some of the dynamics that would be involved if one of Walzer’s social critics were to reference and combine multiple “critical languages” simultaneously, like I have suggested religious social critics characteristically do. Specifically, it suggests that the moral bricoleur appeals to inherited traditions and resources in a way that identifies points of complementarity or overlap between them. In a first step, it highlights the ways in which a religious social critic can make recourse to diverse semiotic and linguistic resources: they make due with whatever resources they have at hand, and those are likely resources from multiple moral traditions found in the surrounding culture of their community or communities. In a second step, Stout’s theory illuminates that the activity of a moral bricoleur is one of identifying a certain overlap in these diverse resources, namely: their ability to speak to and solve a specific problem or set of problems in a community. In these two ways, Stout’s conception of moral bricolage helps push Walzer’s theory some distance toward theorizing the dynamics of religious social critics’ multiple memberships in overlapping communities in their criticism and in the life of American democracy.

⁵¹ Ibid., 74.

⁵² Ibid., 77.

Yet, the usefulness of Stout's conception of moral bricolage for this study is limited in two ways: while it suggests the importance of overlapping interpretation, it fails to fully grasp both the nature of the overlap and the activity of interpretation which characterize moral bricolage. First, it undertheorizes the nature of the aforementioned overlap. Specifically, Stout's theory does not appear to conceive of the moral bricoleur as one person maintaining multiple memberships in overlapping communities. Rather, he seems to picture her as one community's jack-of-all-trades who conducts her business in the overlap of moral languages, fragments, and vocabularies that are already at the disposal of that relatively discrete and stable moral community. In this way, Stout's picture appears to assume some kind of discrete and stable community as the backdrop against which the moral bricoleur is able to conduct her bricolage. As such, it is subject to of the above criticisms I levied against Walzer's assumption of a homogenous national community, in particular its resulting inability to relate the meanings and communities we do share to the ones that we do not.

Second, Stout's conception of bricolage similarly undertheorizes the role of interpretation. In fact, Stout never provides a singular verb to correspond to the nouns "bricolage" and "bricoleur." Rather, he uses a number of terms to describe the range of activities that characterizes the practice of bricolage: "taking stock" and "taking apart, putting together, reordering, weighting, weeding out, filling in."⁵³ He refers to moral bricolage as a "process of inclusion, exclusion, and reconfiguration," but is less clear about what he takes to be the common action or practice that characterizes this "process" he calls "bricolage."⁵⁴ In short, he fails to clearly specify what his analysis clearly suggests: that moral bricolage is an act of

⁵³ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 76.

(re)interpretation of an inheritance.⁵⁵ This oversight renders Stout's theory susceptible to the same set of critiques I levied against Dewey's theory in the previous chapter: it fails to provide the theory of interpretation and social criticism that it suggests and invites. On this score, Walzer's theory proves more adequate.

Nevertheless, Stout's conception of moral bricolage evocatively suggests the relevance of both overlap and interpretation: the moral bricoleur trades in overlaps of existing moral languages or fragments of moral languages and does so precisely by (re)interpreting them. And his theory does slightly better than Walzer's in its effort to account for the diversity of signs and symbols to which the moral-bricoleur-cum-social-critic appeals. Yet, it nevertheless fails to provide an explicit and thoroughgoing analysis of either the interpretive nature of this activity or of the overlaps in which moral bricolage trades. In this way, his theory provides both a clue and inspiration for a more adequate framework of overlapping interpretations.

⁵⁵ Stout himself appears skeptical about the field and method of hermeneutics (see his two definitions on pp. 298). Nevertheless, he does use the language of "hermeneutical innovation" (presumably in what he calls the term's "good sense") to describe the interpretive nature of the act of bricolage, though somewhat unclearly, and in a different context. He uses the phrase not in a discussion of the cobbling together of different "moral languages" by a bricoleur, but in his discussion of the *translation* of a moral proposition from one moral language to another. Stout argues against Chris Swoyer's claim that there exist moral propositions that cannot be expressed in another culture's or society's moral language. He argues instead that the issue that Swoyer identifies is actually one of the *untranslatability* of the propositions in question. And in his refutation of Swoyer's concern about this inexpressibility or untranslatability of moral propositions, Stout evinces an awareness that the activity of bricolage is interpretive or "hermeneutical." He writes that, "untranslatability may be overcome by hermeneutical innovation. If, at a given time, a proposition expressible in one language, L₁, is not expressible in another, L₂, this need not be so at some later time. L₂, after all, can be developed hermeneutically," (64). By recognizing that moral languages are subject to "hermeneutical innovation," Stout suggests that the kind of activity he understands his moral bricoleur, creator of new moral languages, to be engaged in is, in fact, interpretation.

Religious Social Criticism and American Democracy

A Theory of Overlapping Interpretations

Such a framework explicitly considers the statements of religious social critics—or moral bricoleurs—as overlapping interpretations. As I demonstrate above, the combination of Walzer’s and Dewey’s theories facilitates the identification of the ways social critics can engage in semiotic communication by interpreting the status quo in light of the community’s shared meanings/understandings in a way that is both simultaneously consciousness-raising and democratizing: their social criticism increases the awareness of our place(s) in the political collective of which we are a part. Yet, Dewey’s and Walzer’s theories equally fail to fully account for the fact that these interpretations reference and reflect the social critic’s multiple memberships. Stout’s theory does somewhat better in its effort to account for the multiple moral traditions and languages from which the moral-bricoleur-cum-social-critic draws her signs and symbols and constructs her interpretations. Yet, he nevertheless fails to provide an adequate account of the nature of the overlaps in which moral bricolage trades and the implications of these overlaps vis-à-vis the social critics’ membership in multiple communities, traditions, or practices. In contrast, I argue that the cases considered in this dissertation demonstrate that the religious social critic has available for such criticism both the national-political community and its meanings, which are shared *by all*, and other communities and their meanings, which are shared by *some*. My theory of overlapping interpretations aims to account for how religious social critics can bridge the gap between those shared by all and those shared by some.

Specifically, I will argue that the reality of multiple memberships in overlapping communities makes possible overlapping interpretations of the sub-set of meanings that are shared by both communities. Making these shared meanings plain is precisely what Dewey,

Heschel, King, and Murray do. In their social criticism, they articulate the overlap they embody, which frequently joins interpretations of American democracy and its ideals with simultaneous interpretations of what they take to be the relevant part(s) of their religious traditions (typically a philosophical or theological anthropology). Each of these figures interprets the status quo using the signs and symbols of American democracy and the signs and symbols of their religious tradition at the same time.

On the one hand, these social critics engage in interpretation that invokes what they take to be the beliefs that American democracy requires of its members. That is to say, they are social critics who often (though by no means exclusively) invoke in their social criticism American democracy's political ethic of belief. When they do, their arguments characteristically take this form: our political tradition requires that you believe X, and therefore, you/we must do Y. As such, their statements constitute first-order interpretations of our shared political tradition, and in particular its belief-dimensions.

On the other hand, these social critics' statements interpret American democracy's doctrines not only in terms of American democracy's own tradition and culture, but also in terms of his specific religious tradition. That is to say, they are social critics who often invoke in their criticism signs and symbols drawn from their religious tradition, most notably those connected to a theological/philosophical anthropology and connect them to American democracy's political ethic of belief. When they do, their arguments characteristically take this form: our religious tradition requires that you believe X *and* our political tradition requires that you believe X, therefore you/we must do Y. As such, their statements constitute both first-order, overlapping interpretations of our shared political tradition as well as first-order, overlapping interpretations of her religious tradition.

In this way, these social critics' connection to two overlapping but distinct collectives—the American nation and their religious community—enables them to interpret American democracy's doctrines both internally and externally. Their point of view is neither wholly internal nor wholly external, but rather characterized by the overlap that arises through their multiple memberships. As Americans, these figures interpret American democracy in and on its own terms; as religionists, they interpret American democracy in and on religious terms. And these religious social critics characteristically do both at the same time. In doing so, they offer first-order, overlapping interpretations of aspects of American democracy as well as aspects of their religious traditions: statements which constitute (re)interpretations of American democracy through recourse to religious signs/symbols that are simultaneously (re)interpretations of those religious symbols in light of the tradition of American democracy.

A Hermeneutics of Political Belief

In doing so, these social critics provide the scholar of political belief a methodological and interpretive advantage when considering the question of political beliefs. Their overlapping interpretations enable the scholar to identify and examine of certain political beliefs and their content, relate these beliefs to religion, and provide an account of the political nature of these beliefs. In doing so, these overlapping interpretations make possible and suggest a hermeneutics of political belief which fulfills the criteria I suggested at the start of the chapter that such a hermeneutics must meet.

Recall my proposal that such a hermeneutics of political belief must include at least four elements: 1) an account of the constitution and nature of the relevant polity; 2) a method of accessing and interpreting the beliefs it requires of its members; in doing so it must then be able

to provide 3) an account of the content of these beliefs; and 4) an account of the grounds on which one can call these beliefs political. We are now in a position to describe how the combination of Dewey's theory of democracy with Walzer's theory of interpretation and social criticism into a theory of overlapping interpretations provides a theoretical framework that can account for all four elements of a hermeneutics of political belief, and also supplies four criteria to apply to the historical examples I examine in the following chapters.

First, Dewey provides the necessary account of the constitution and nature of American democracy, the political community in which these interpretations overlap. As I discussed at length above, Dewey's theory of democracy suggests that American democracy's constitution is importantly psychological and that it makes belief-demands on its members; his democratic conscioquentialism suggests that democracy constitutes a certain consciousness of one's community and her place in it and, as such, presupposes and assumes certain beliefs about human beings and human community, which its members must take as true in order to make it work. Furthermore, Dewey's corresponding theory of the Eclipse of the Public provides a framework for conceptualizing and identifying the impediments/threats to this consciousness to which the social critics in this study are responding, and his semiotics of social inquiry suggests a remedy. Thus, in order to establish that these social critics' invocation of American democracy's belief-demands are concerned with fundamental threat to American democracy itself, I will need to show, in each case, that in his overlapping interpretations, each social critic is responding to a certain Eclipse of the Public by invoking signs and symbols to raise consciousness of the Public which they share with their interlocutors.

Second, Walzer's theory of interpretation and social criticism offers the framework of overlapping interpretations a method of accessing and interpreting the beliefs American

democracy requires of its members. It does so by supplementing Dewey's theory in a way that makes plain how the statements of social critics often respond to threats to American democracy by appealing to and interpreting American democracy's political ethic of belief. Walzer's theory suggests that the social critic interprets the tradition of the community of which she is already a part. Thus, it enables us to consider these social critics' statements in response to threats to American democracy as interpretations of what the social critic's own political tradition requires: they constitute interpretations of what he takes to be American democracy's belief-demands. In each case, I will need to show that the signs and symbols which these social critics invoke in order to raise this consciousness constitute interpretations of the beliefs they consider to be required by the tradition of American democracy.

Third, by providing an account of American democracy and a method of observing American democracy's doctrines through the statements of the social critics who invoke them, the framework of overlapping interpretations also enables the identification of the content of these overlapping interpretations, the content of the beliefs in question. This content turns out to be a humanistic axiology. But this emerges in and through the examination of each of the examples. Thus, in each case, I will both be able to and required to provide evidence for the content of these political beliefs and belief-demand.

Fourth and finally, the framework of overlapping interpretations enables the political nature of these beliefs to emerge in relief. We will see that these beliefs are political in their necessity and their justification: they are both required and justified by the reality of a particular political ideal, in this case, a democratic one of popular sovereignty. This political nature of the requirement and justification emerges plainly in contrast to the religious signs/symbols that each social critic invokes in order to help make sense of these belief-requirements. Where the

interpretation of these beliefs and their necessity in terms of religious/signs symbols ends, their political character begins. In this way, the theory of overlapping interpretations also helps us to provide an account of the specifically political character of these beliefs, why we must hold them, and how we are justified in doing so. Thus, in each case, I will need to show how each social critic makes sense of American democracy's belief-demand in religious terms, by invoking religious signs/symbols.

In sum, I will need to show that each of the figures functions as a social critic in American society who is responding to an Eclipse of the Public (an eclipse of the consciousness that constitutes democracy) by the consciousness-raising invocation of religious signs and symbols which they invoke, at least in part, in response to American democracy's humanistic belief-demands. In this way, by applying Dewey's theory of democracy, duly supplemented with Walzer's theory of interpretation and social criticism adapted into a theory of overlapping interpretations, to the cases considered in the subsequent chapters, I will provide evidence of American democracy's political ethic of belief. These statements are first-order interpretations in religious terms of the beliefs these actors understand to be required by the tradition of American democracy. Therefore, I will use this framework of overlapping interpretations, in the ways sketched above, to identify and examine the statements in which these religious social critics respond to and interpret what they take to be the belief-demands of the normative political tradition of which they are a part—American democracy.

3. John Courtney Murray: The “American Consensus” and the Natural Law

We hold certain truths; therefore we can argue about them.

John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths*

They are the reflections of a citizen who considers it his duty to be able to answer the fundamental civil question: ‘What are the truths we hold?’ They are also the reflections of a Catholic who, in seeking his answer to the civil question, knows that the principles of Catholic faith and morality stand superior to, and in control of, the whole order of civil life.

John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths*

Only the theory of natural law is able to give an account of the public moral experience that is the public consensus. This consensus is the tradition of reason as emergent in developing form in the special circumstances of American political-economic life.

John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths*

Introduction

When, on December 12, 1960, John Courtney Murray, S.J. appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, he became perhaps the most famous Roman Catholic priest in the United States.

Weeks earlier, Americans elected the first Roman Catholic president in the history of the United States, John F. Kennedy. Just days before the election, Murray published what would become his most famous work: *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*.¹

The book’s publisher, Sheed & Ward, was eager to bring Murray’s ideas to a broad swath of the American public for the first time in the run-up to the election.² In the book, Murray offers Catholic “reflections,” which he had written over the previous decade or so, on the ways that Catholic doctrine and tradition could help American democracy cope with the pressing challenges it faced. For his part, Murray was firmly convinced that the Catholic tradition was able to speak to the problems that modernity posed to America in the mid-twentieth century. For

¹ John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005).

² John F. Quinn, “We Hold These Truths at Fifty: John Courtney Murray’s Contested Legacy,” *American Catholic Studies* 122, No. 3 (Fall 2011): 31-51.

this reason, he worked over the course of the early post-war years to bring Catholic doctrine to bear on public thought and discourse about America's problems. Moreover, Murray was careful to do so in a way that was sensitive to the United States' increasingly plural religious makeup: he worked to make these "Catholic reflections" intelligible to *all* Americans, regardless of religious affiliation. The book sold well, was favorably reviewed (a paperback edition debuted in 1964), and Murray catapulted to the position of America's premier interpreter of the relationship between Catholic tradition and American democracy. It seemed that Catholicism's hour had come in more ways than one, and thanks to the persistent efforts of the editors at Sheed & Ward, Murray became *the* Catholic social critic in postwar America.

However, Murray is not most often remembered for his project of social criticism vis-à-vis American democracy, but rather for his other related, yet distinct, project: helping the global Catholic church to bring up to date its teaching on religious pluralism and religious freedom. Indeed, Murray authored a series of famous arguments urging the Church to endorse an official policy of religious freedom, and also participated in the drafting of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humane*. And these contributions are deservedly regarded as a pinnacle of Murray's career.

Nevertheless, I will focus in this chapter on the former project: Murray's project of domestic social criticism, which focuses on the specific relationship between Catholicism and American democracy and is epitomized in his book, *We Hold These Truths*. Murray wrote the essays it contains in years immediately following the Second World War in order to help shape post-war American society, particularly in response to the forces straining the social and political fabric of America: massive military disruption, technological advancements, and social change. Not only does Murray offer his reflections to an America that was groping to find its way as a

world leader in the nuclear age that it inaugurated, but also in a decade that saw a record number of Americans purchase a television for their home and saw the inauguration of the interstate system. Murray's post-war American society was increasingly knit together by commerce, industry, telecommunication, transportation systems, and a middle-class lifestyle despite the fact it found itself, in many ways, more diverse than ever—racially, ethnically, and religiously. It is to and about this increasingly diverse, prosperous, and powerful America that Murray offers his reflections in *We Hold These Truths*, aimed to remind Americans that the political tradition that they inherit from their ancestors has something to say about how to use their prosperity and power as they navigate this diverse and uncertain post-war modernity.

Murray himself states this focus in the book's preface:

They [the essays contained in the volume] are the reflections of a citizen who considers it his duty to be able to answer the fundamental civil question: 'What are the truths we hold?' They are also the reflections of a Catholic who, in seeking his answer to the civil question, knows that the principles of Catholic faith and morality stand superior to, and in control of, the whole order of civil life.³

As the above passage (as well as the book's title) suggest, the Catholic "reflections" it contains deal directly with what American democracy requires Americans to believe, as well as the relationship of those beliefs to Catholic doctrine. In its focus on this "fundamental civil question," the collection is in many ways an extended reflection on what I have been calling American democracy's political ethic of belief. This observation already invites inquiry into Murray's understanding of American democracy's political ethic of belief, because it suggests that his statements provide evidence of its existence and his interpretations of its content.

Furthermore, when Murray identifies the beliefs that he thinks are required by American democracy, he does so, at least in part, to highlight the overlap between this American doctrine

³ Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, xiii.

with Catholic tradition. Time and again, he uses Roman Catholic signs and symbols to illuminate the beliefs required by the American democratic political tradition. By highlighting this overlap, Murray hopes not only to bring Catholic tradition (in particular its understanding of the Western “tradition of reason” or “natural law”) to bear on American politics and society. More than that, he hopes to make plain that the tradition of American democracy has been genealogically and epistemologically committed to this “tradition of reason” all along. And it is for this reason that Murray believes that America’s large population of Catholics are well-poised to remind Americans of their own political patrimony and invite them to recommit themselves to it in the face of the challenges of the postwar world.

Additionally, Murray exemplifies a religious social critic, a Deweyan-Walzerian prophet of the Public such as are the objects of this study. As I will show below, Murray expresses deep concern that something akin to Dewey’s “Public” has been eclipsed by various forces of modernity, and he aims to raise Americans’ individual and collective consciousness to this fact by drawing semiotic resources from both the American-democratic and the Catholic tradition to respond to this Eclipse. In so doing, he provides in his writings overlapping interpretations of the meaning of the tradition of American democracy in *both* American-democratic and Catholic-natural law terms. These interpretations work to make explicit those understandings which Murray believes Americans share regardless of religious affiliation and to bring them to bear on the problems facing American society.

An Obvious Overlap

Anyone who reads much of Murray’s corpus dealing with American democracy is likely to notice this overlap immediately: it is rather obvious. In these writings, Murray consistently

writes and speaks in overlapping terms about American democracy and Catholicism. In *We Hold These Truths*, Murray goes so far as to include his overlapping agenda in the subtitle: “*Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*.” And, given that Murray was himself both an American and a Catholic, it would be rather strange for his statements to exclude either set of terms entirely.

Yet, if scholars appreciate the overlapping dimension of Murray’s statements, they too often fail to appreciate the hermeneutic force of Murray’s statements as overlapping *interpretations*. Instead, Murray scholars generally discuss his overlapping interpretations in one of three modes: 1) they note the overlap, and/or 2) they debate the status accorded Catholic doctrine/theology relative to American politics in Murray’s statements, and/or 3) they evaluate the success of Murray’s statements as philosophical arguments. I will briefly consider each approach in order to sharpen my own account.

Four Approaches

Notation

The first and most common mode of engagement with Murray’s overlapping interpretations takes the form of a straightforward notation of the overlap in the course of scholars’ exposition or summary of Murray’s project, which typically precedes and introduces an argument about a different aspect of Murray’s thought. For example, in the preface to a collection of articles from 1992 on Murray’s projects and legacy, Donald J. D’Elia and Stephen M. Krason name this overlap “The Murray Thesis” and use it as a rubric to organize the essays in the book, each of which treats the subject in one way or another:

In this book [*We Hold These Truths*], published in 1960, the Jesuit scholar advanced what might be called the Murray thesis: that, in essence, the principles undergirding the

American Founding were not only compatible with Catholicism—a proposition many had doubted and even attacked for much of our history—but it might soon be that only Catholics were going to be willing to uphold them. This is because, he said, these principles had their roots in the philosophical tradition most fully developed in the Catholic Middle Ages in Europe. The political tenets of our founding, Murray held, were drawn from the truths of human nature and natural law jealously guarded by this great tradition.⁴

The collection's first three sections are organized to reflect on Murray's "thesis" about the overlap between American democracy and Catholic natural law, including discussion of its background, as well as criticisms and defenses of it. In all cases, scholars note, some more in passing than others, that Murray is working at the nexus of both the Catholic tradition and the American political tradition.

Accommodation

The second mode of engagement with Murray's overlapping interpretations generally focuses on Catholicism's status vis-à-vis American democracy. Scholars operating in this mode are concerned with the following questions: to what degree does Murray accommodate Catholic doctrine/theology to American democracy? Can the natural law function in the way Murray imagines without explicit reference to God or Christian theology? On the one hand, critics such as John A. Gueguen and Michael J. Schuck accuse Murray's overlapping interpretations of accommodating Catholic teaching to the American political tradition, thereby diluting or deforming traditional Catholic teaching on church-state relations, and/or neutering the force of the church's teachings about the natural law by divorcing them from their more theological underpinnings.⁵ On the other, Murray's defenders, such as Peter Augustine Lawler, argue that

⁴ Donald J. D'Elia and Stephen M. Krason, ed., "Preface" in *We Hold These Truths and More*, (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1993): vii.

⁵ John A. Gueguen, "Murray: Defender of the Myth" in *We Hold These Truths and More*, ed. Donald J. D'Elia and Stephen M. Krason, (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1993): 34; Michael J. Schuck, "John Courtney Murray's Problematic Interpretations of Leo XIII and the American Founders," in *The Thomist* 55, no. 4 (October 1991): 595-612.

Murray makes it clear that he is doing precisely the opposite. Lawler criticizes what he sees as a misunderstanding of Murray's project at the heart of William Gould's and John A. Gueguen's position that:

Murray is usually praised and blamed for attempting to reconcile Catholic with American thought, and with good reason. But he is also praised and blamed for attempting to remove from Catholic thought all opposition to what Americans regard as self-evident. That he did not do. His project of reconciliation is based in a reinterpretation of America, and not a reinterpretation of the Church.⁶

This difference in interpretation arises, in part, because the precise relationship between the authority of Catholic doctrine and tradition and that of the American political tradition is a complex and nuanced part of Murray's thought.

Robert McElroy comes closest to tracking Murray's argument and method in *We Hold These Truths* when he outlines what he calls "Murray's four-fold approach to the conversation between American culture and Catholic social teaching." McElroy argues that "John Courtney Murray's four-fold approach to the conversation between American culture and Catholic social teaching still remains valid: seek the common ground; identify where Catholicism can correct American society; identify where Catholic theology can be informed by the American experience; and always retain the critical reservation."⁷ This four-step approach tracks Murray's approach closely by capturing Murray's view that the Catholic tradition was, as Murray himself clearly stated, consistently the regulating force in Murray's interpretations of American political tradition. Crucially, it also captures Murray's view that, despite this fact, it was possible that Catholic tradition could be *informed by* though not *dictated to* by the relevant data of American

⁶ Peter Lawler, "Murray's Transformation of the American Proposition" in *We Hold These Truths and More*, edited by Donald J. D'Elia and Stephen M. Krason, (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1993): 93.

⁷ Robert McElroy, "Catholicism and the American Polity: Murray as Interlocutor" in *John Courtney Murray and the Growth of Tradition*, ed. J. Leon Hooper, S.J. and Todd David Whitmore, (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1996): 16.

political experience.⁸ Nevertheless, in all of the above cases, the scholarly debate revolves around the central question of whether, or to what to degree, Murray's overlapping interpretations accommodate Catholic tradition to American politics.⁹

Demonstration

Other scholars who focus on this overlap dwell on Murray's method of establishing that this overlap exists. This method they interpret to be philosophical demonstration, and they debate the success of Murray's use of that method.¹⁰ This third strand of analysis is often related to the second, though also importantly distinct from it. It focuses on the question of whether Murray "got it right," according to American tradition and values, Catholic tradition and doctrine, and/or both. Michael J. Schuck, for example, argues that Murray's philosophical arguments rely on misinterpretations of both key papal encyclicals as well as American political thought and therefore their conclusions should not be trusted.¹¹ In this way, scholars engaging in this mode

⁸ In the Preface to *WHITT*, Murray writes about the essays contained therein: "They are the reflections of a citizen who considers it his duty to be able to answer the fundamental civil question: 'What are the truths we hold?' They are also the reflections of a Catholic who, in seeking his answer to the civil question, knows that the principles of Catholic faith and morality stand superior to, and in control of, the whole order of civil life. The question is sometimes raised, whether Catholicism is compatible with American democracy. The question is invalid as well as impertinent; for the manner of its position inverts the order of values. It must, of course, be turned round to read, whether American democracy is compatible with Catholicism. The question, thus turned, is part of the civil question, as put to me. An affirmative answer to it, given under something better than curbstoep definition of 'democracy,' is one of the truths I hold," xiii.

⁹ Frederick G. Lawrence provides another compelling interpretation of Murray's strategy in *We Hold These Truths* as an instance of Hans-Georg Gadamer's "fusion of horizons." See "John Courtney Murray and the Ambiguities of Liberalism" in *John Courtney Murray and the Growth of a Tradition*, ed. J. Leon Hooper, S.J., and Todd David Whitmore, (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1996): 41-59.

¹⁰ This method does characterize many of Murray's arguments on religious liberty, but it does not characterize his statements about the compatibility of American democracy and Catholicism. The interpretation of Murray's project as philosophical demonstration is more appropriate to this part of his writings because in his writing on religious liberty, he was aiming to articulate such philosophically and theologically conclusive arguments. However, assuming that this method also characterizes Murray's statements Catholicism and American democracy through this method is ill-informed. Such an interpretation misses the fact that Murray's social criticism aimed at American democracy aims is to point out an *overlap* in the American political tradition and Catholic tradition of natural law by providing accounts *plausible enough* to convince his audience to take the overlap seriously. This project's success does not rely on Murray's ability argue from Catholic premises to American conclusions or vice versa, neither of which Murray aimed to do.

¹¹ Michael J. Schuck, "John Courtney Murray's Problematic Interpretations of Leo XIII and the American Founders," *The Thomist* 55, No. 4 (October 1991): 595-612. Schuck argues that Murray's philosophical arguments rely on misinterpretations of both key papal encyclicals as well as American political thought. This line of criticism would

assume that Murray aims to philosophically demonstrate—with the rigorous conclusiveness of argumentation from premises to conclusions—the overlap between Catholicism and American democracy (i.e., from Catholic premises we can reason soundly to American conclusions). With this assumption in place, they argue that Murray fails to convincingly demonstrate the overlap between Catholicism and American democracy which he aims to articulate, because his arguments fail in one way or another.¹²

However, not all scholars interpret Murray's statements to be primarily an exercise in philosophical argumentation, or at least not one that needs to be conclusive. Both William Gould and John A. Gueguen argue that Murray's failure to conclusively demonstrate such an overlap is a function of the simple fact that he was not offering philosophically conclusive arguments. Rather, Gueguen claims that Murray's project was in an important sense a "political manifesto," in which the arguments it contains are designed to accord *plausibly enough* with both history and the American experience. If these arguments do so, they can give rise to what both Gould and Gueguen call a "noble myth," namely, Murray's claim that a certain sympatico exists between traditional Catholic and American political doctrine, one that has positive social benefits in a religiously plural society.¹³ I agree with Gueguen's broad approach: that Murray's project regarding American democracy should be treated as an importantly political project and should not be read as a philosophical treatise aiming at conclusive philosophical argumentation. Rather,

undermine Murray's project if the success of Murray's project hinged on the strict rectitude of his understanding of either American-political or Catholic tradition. As it stands, arguments like Schuck's rest on the suspicious premise that there is more-or-less one correct and authoritative interpretation of each tradition. This suppressed premise betrays both a misunderstanding of the dynamics involved in a social critic's exercise of authority as well as a picture of American and Catholic traditions as univocal and static.

¹² See also, for example, Frederick D. Wilhelmsen, "John Courtney Murray: The Optimism of the 1950's" in *We Hold These Truths and More*, ed. Donald J. D'Elia and Stephen M. Krason, (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1993): 20-32.

¹³ John A. Gueguen, "Murray: Defender of the Myth" in *We Hold These Truths and More*, ed. Donald J. D'Elia and Stephen M. Krason, (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1993): 34.

as I will show below, it is a hermeneutic project of social criticism rather than water-tight argumentation.

Interpretation

Treating Murray's "reflections" as a hermeneutic project enables one to observe the ways that Murray is engaging in *interpretation*, even as he constructs arguments in support of his claims about the compatibility of American democracy with Catholic doctrine. Yet, this hermeneutic dimension of Murray's project of social criticism has often been missed in the scholarship. As Peter Lawler has put it: "*We Hold These Truths* is the great work of political philosophy written by an American Catholic. It has had an enormous influence and is widely respected as authoritative. But it is still not well understood."¹⁴ Indeed, I believe that key implications of the rhetorical force and mediating function of Murray's interpretations on democratic theory have been underappreciated. A focus on interpretation will help to bring them into view.

Therefore, in this chapter, I will consider the features of Murray's overlapping social criticism that can help us think about democratic political theory in a religiously plural democracy. For this reason, I will not enter the aforementioned debate about the success of Murray's philosophical, historical, or genealogical arguments in this chapter. Rather, in the section below, entitled "Two Kinds of Overlap" and where I address these arguments at length, I follow Gueguen's lead by considering their rhetorical function instead. Doing so enables me to demonstrate that Murray's two main "arguments" for the overlap between Catholicism and American democracy function as overlapping interpretations of the beliefs Murray takes to be required by both American democracy and the Catholic tradition of natural law. They do so

¹⁴ Peter Lawler, "Murray's Transformation of the American Proposition" in *We Hold These Truths and More*, ed. Donald J. D'Elia and Stephen M. Krason, (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 1993): 93.

regardless of their more particular merits as historical, genealogical, logical, or theological arguments.

Such an approach enables us to “zoom out” from the Murray scholarship that focuses on the particular questions of the philosophical rigor and/or orthodox nature of Murray’s statements regarding Catholicism and American democracy in order to help us see what kind of other activities Murray was engaged in and to draw out the implications of this kind of religious social criticism for democratic theory. When we step back from Murray’s arguments in this way, we can observe Murray identifying key overlaps in what he took to be American democracy’s and Catholicism’s ethics of belief, and using these resonances to mediate between American and Catholic tradition in order to articulate consciousness-raising social criticism that aimed to bring the shared commitments of both traditions to bear on the challenges that modernity posed to American democracy.¹⁵

Viewing Murray’s statements as overlapping interpretations enables one not only to note the existence of such overlap, but also to identify its dynamics, which, as I have been arguing throughout, have significant implications for conceptualizing the relationship between religion and democracy in the United States. As I will show below, treating Murray as a religious social critic helps us appreciate at least three of these dynamics. First, this focus helps us to see that the

¹⁵ Robert McElroy, *The Search for an American Public Theology*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989). McElroy provides the most comprehensive and sustained analysis of Murray’s thought on American democracy. He provides a systematic exposition of Murray’s political thought in the effort to construct a consistent public theology that we might use to inform then current political debates. In doing so, McElroy comes closest to providing an analysis of mediating function of both Murray’s statements and the natural law itself. McElroy argues, somewhat in passing, that Murray understood the “public philosophy” flowing from the natural law tradition to *mediate* between “religious values” or “religious truth” in a religiously pluralistic society. He writes that, “The end of the state was markedly different from the total end of the human person, and any effort to mix these two perspective indiscriminately could only produce poor public policy and great hostility in a religiously pluralistic society. The proper path lay in mediation of religious truth by the public philosophy of the natural law tradition,” (96). And McElroy agrees that the natural law tradition has emerged as key mediator, which has functioned to bridge diversity, especially in the international arena, in the years since Murray’s death (157). However, McElroy does not think that the sheer language of natural law, unaided by biblical imagery, will have the motivational power that Murray thinks it will.

overlap Murray sees between the traditions of American democracy and Catholic Christianity is on a set of importantly normative matters: a shared commitment to “the tradition of reason”, the “natural law,” along with its attendant conception of the dignified human person. Second, as the title of Murray’s most famous work suggests, this overlap engages American democracy’s psychological and doxastic dimensions: Murray uses the language of “truths,” “belief,” and “epistemology” to describe not only the content of the overlap he identifies but also describe the psychological disposition that “holding” them involves—a disposition he aims to encourage in his readers and Americans writ large. Third, my approach makes clear the extent to which this overlap is dialogic and hermeneutic in nature: a full appreciation of the ways Catholicism speaks to American democracy and American democracy speaks to Catholicism emerges only through an interpretation (such as Murray’s) of both traditions. On the topic at hand, Murray’s statements suggest that each relies on the other for elaboration in other terms.¹⁶ Because each of these points helps us to grasp the doxastic, dialogic, and hermeneutic dimensions of the relationship between religion and American democracy, these observations thus helps us to see the ways that American democracy’s humanistic axiology and corresponding political ethic of belief function to facilitate equality and liberty amidst conditions of diversity by making possible a set of shared meanings which diverse Americans, such as Murray, can make sense of in diverse terms.

In the sections that follow, I will focus my analysis on Murray’s statements in *We Hold These Truths* (*WHTT*). I do so for several reasons. First, even though *WHTT* is a collection of essays, it is the closest Murray ever came to writing a monograph on the topic of American democracy and its relationship to Catholicism. As such, it represents Murray’s own self-

¹⁶ This is not to suggest that Murray does not accord a final and ultimate priority to Christianity. As I suggested in the section above, he certainly does and he is clear about this relation. Nevertheless, he suggests time and again that Christianity *does* have something important to learn from the American experience of self-government amid (the non-ideal and regrettable, according to Murray) conditions of religious pluralism.

consciously curated, edited, and expanded collection of thought on the topic. Second, it proves sufficiently comprehensive for the current task; it contains all of his signature arguments about American democracy's and Catholicism's shared commitment to natural law, even if these arguments can also be found in his other writings. Third, *WHIT* is his most well-known published work, and therefore deserves special attention as a work of social criticism. Though Murray's religious social criticism cannot be confined to this text, but rather includes his broad array of writings in periodicals as well as his many speeches and interviews before public audiences, the reach of *WHIT* has been singular both in Murray's lifetime and in its more recent afterlife. It contains Murray's most sustained, comprehensive, famous, and important for the argument at hand, his most intentionally overlapping interpretations. For these reasons, it provides us evidence well-suited for considering democracy's hermeneutic and dialogic dimensions.

I will argue that Murray simultaneously invokes the symbols denoting Catholic notions of natural law as well as American-democratic symbols in order to interpret the meaning of the beliefs he takes to be required by both Catholic Christianity and American democracy. I further argue that Murray does so in a way that aims to raise Americans' consciousness to the self-conscious possession/endorsement of a humanistic axiology that is the inheritance of both of these traditions and the only thing that Murray thinks will help American democracy face the challenges posed by modernity. Along the way, I will demonstrate how the example of Murray's social criticism meets the four hermeneutical criteria I outlined in Chapter 2: I will 1) demonstrate that Murray's overlapping interpretations respond to an Eclipse of the Public by the multiple forces of modernity in American society, 2) demonstrate that Murray understands both the traditions of American democracy and Catholic Christianity to each involve an ethic of

belief, 3) provide evidence that Murray understands these ethics of belief to overlap on a certain humanistic axiology and thereby 4) make plain the hermeneutic and dialogic mediating function of both religious social critics and this humanistic axiology in a religiously plural, democratic society.

Murray's Consciousness-Raising Social Criticism

As I suggested above, is my contention that, in addition to being a Jesuit priest, a theologian, and a philosopher, John Courtney Murray was also importantly a social critic whose statements about the status-quo in American society were designed to levy a sharp critique in overlapping terms. Robert McElroy notes that the 1950s were a period in which Murray increasingly articulated a critical message about American political life to diverse types of audiences:

If the period of the 1950's constituted Murray's period of exile from the doctrinal debate on religious liberty, it also constituted his emergence as a leading public spokesman for the Church in the United States, a spokesman who presented the principles of Catholic social teaching in a manner which seemed eminently compatible with the American political tradition. To audiences that ranged from the Yale faculty to the Knights of Columbus, from the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions to the readers of *Life* and *Time* magazines, Murray brought home the same theme: the political institutions of American life were increasingly alienated from their spiritual roots and were becoming enemies to the dignity of the human person rather than supports to that dignity. Unless this process was reversed, Murray told the America of the 1950's, the noble experiment that was American democracy could not hope to survive.¹⁷

It is in this role as a religious social critic that Murray's overlapping interpretations of American democracy's and Christianity's ethics of belief are most apparent. In his writings and speeches responding to these challenges Murray appears as a Deweyan-Walzerian Prophet of the Public.

¹⁷ McElroy, *The Search for an American Public Theology*, 78. Murray's attention to the topic of American democracy and politics directly correlates with the years in which the Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith (then the Holy Office) censored his writings on religious liberty and church-state relations, which began in 1954.

To fully appreciate the social criticism that Murray articulates in *WHTT*, one must first grasp the problems at which Murray aims his critique. The challenges that Murray saw facing American democracy and society are multiple and so I will refer to the collection of them under the rubric of the “forces of modernity.” Doing so will help me make plain the ways in which Murray can be understood as responding to a Deweyan Eclipse of the Public by these multifaceted forces, which include at minimum: secularism, atheism, religious pluralism, communism/totalitarianism, nativism, and industrialism. Precisely in response to the Eclipse of the traditional American collective self-understanding by this distinct set of forces, Murray insists that both American democracy and Catholic Christianity provide “spiritual” resources from which a new “public consensus” can be created that is not wholly negative and reactive (like the liberal political theory of the Enlightenment), but is rather a positive “order of freedom” that is ordered around the value of the human person—what I refer to as a humanistic axiology.¹⁸

An American Collective Self-Understanding

However, before moving onto the Eclipse of the Public, we would do well to start with a clearer picture of what Murray saw as the “Public” that was being eclipsed when he collected the essays in *WHTT*. On the face of it, the relevant object of analysis is obviously the United States of America. Yet, what Murray understands to constitute “America” is particular and nuanced. He does not imagine America primarily in terms of geography, citizenship status, language, culture, or history, though many of these factors are important. To put it most simply: Murray envisions America to be *a collection of people who share a particular self-understanding*. To make matters more confusing to the uninitiated reader, Murray describes this distinctive self-understanding

¹⁸ Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 286-87.

using an array of related terms. As he puts the matter in the Preface, Murray is exploring in these essays “the content, the foundations, the mode of formation, the validity, etc. of the American Proposition, or as it is otherwise called, with nuances of meaning, the public consensus or the public philosophy of America.”¹⁹ This array of terms, “the American Proposition,” the “Public (sometimes “American”) consensus,” and “the public philosophy of America” are Murray’s metaphors of choice for denoting America’s particular “conception of itself that first constituted us a people organized for action in history.”²⁰ This conception, Murray suggests, arose in the colonial period out of and in response to a unique set of historical conditions, and in particular, the fact of pluralism as the “native condition of American society.”²¹ First and foremost, then, it becomes clear that Murray is concerned with America as the self-conception or self-understanding of a particular people. He uses this array of terms to refer to this collective self-understanding and its role in the workings of American public life. For the sake of clarity and consistency, I will refer to this self-understanding, and all that Murray means by these terms, as “the American consensus.”

No matter which of these particular terms Murray uses, he argues that this American collective self-understanding relies on a 1) “realist epistemology” or “ensemble of substantive truths” which 2) constitutes Americans into a collective with an “identity as a people” that understands itself to be “organized for action in history” and, as such, is 3) an ongoing condition

¹⁹ Ibid., xii. As Murray suggests in this quotation, he understands each of these terms to offer a certain nuance in describing this collective self-understanding. As far as I can tell, “the American proposition” emphasizes the self-understanding’s dual nature as both doctrinal (a statement of a truth to be demonstrated) and practical (an operation to be performed in the world). This formulation stresses the duality of its intellectual and epistemic dimensions, on the one hand, as well as its historical, practical, and political dimensions, on the other. Regarding the other two formulations, Murray makes clear on p. 87 that the “American/public consensus” formulation is designed to emphasize the “subjectivity of persuasion” involved in this collective self-understanding, whereas the “public philosophy” formulation is designed to denote its “objectivity of content.”

²⁰ Ibid, xii.

²¹ Ibid., 43.

of possibility for the rational and deliberative “public argument” about those truths that constitutes Americans as a specifically *political* association. A brief discussion of each of these features of this collective self-understanding will prove instructive, particularly because his picture of the American consensus contains within it a theory of political constitution—an account of the origin and makeup of the body politic, as well as its internal dynamics.

First, as the title of *We Hold These Truths* suggests, Murray takes the American collective self-understanding to be importantly grounded in what he calls a “realist epistemology.”²² By this, he means that the American self-understanding is first and foremost a function of the fact that, historically speaking, most Americans have “held”—consciously or unconsciously—some basic truths in common. And as the title further suggests, Murray maintains that this epistemology is specifically a *realist* epistemology, or a set of “substantive truths,” that are grounded in the way things are. Furthermore, they have informed, been affirmed by, and underwritten the central aspects of the American political tradition since its inception:

It [the public consensus] is not simply a set of working hypotheses whose value is pragmatic. It is an ensemble of substantive truths, a structure of basic knowledge, an order of elementary affirmations that reflect realities inherent in the order of existence. It occupies an established position in society and excludes opinions alien or contrary to itself. This consensus is the intuitional a priori of all the rationalities and technicalities of constitutional and statutory law. It furnishes the premise of the people’s action in history and defines the larger aims which that action seeks in international affairs and in external relations.²³

As the title of the work further alludes, the most direct and important (though not comprehensive) statement of this epistemology, Murray says, is to be found in the Declaration of Independence’s famous lines that begin with the statement that “We hold these truths...”. He writes of these lines: “The sense of the famous phrase is simply this: ‘There are truths, and we

²² *Ibid.*, xii.

²³ *Ibid.*, 27.

hold them, and we here lay them down as the basis and inspiration of the American project, this constitutional commonwealth.”²⁴

Murray does not argue that the Declaration’s statement of this epistemology is definitive or comprehensive, but rather states that it is an “intuitional a priori” which has had and continues to have an important constitutional function in the life and identity of the American people. Because the Declaration’s statement is not comprehensive, only some of the “truths” are found in the document, while other of these “a priori” realities are implicit in them, in the American political tradition, its institutions, ideas and, in an important way, the self-understanding of the American people. I will treat the specifically realist nature of this epistemology and the promise that Murray sees for such realism in enabling this epistemology to function as the basis for some measure of unity in a religiously plural society below. At this point, a brief statement of the contents of these “truths” that Murray sees undergirding the American collective self-understanding in question will suffice.

Murray suggests that this American, collective self-understanding knows to be true no fewer than five realities, which encompass both political and moral truths. The first truth is stated in the Declaration and consists in the recognition of “the Sovereignty of God over nations as well as over individual men.”²⁵ Second, the American self-understanding recognizes the truths of the tradition of natural law, which Murray understands, for example, to undergird the entire Bill of Rights.²⁶ Third, it recognizes the principle of consent of the governed as the principle of legitimate government.²⁷ Fourth, it accepts as valid the distinction between state and society,

²⁴ Ibid., xii.

²⁵ Ibid., 44.

²⁶ Ibid., 47, 53.

²⁷ Ibid., 48-49.

rejecting a monistic, omniscient understanding of the state over all dimensions of society.²⁸

These points lead to the final truth, which Murray suggests encompass all the rest: the American self-understanding regards the American people to be a free people under limited government.²⁹

Furthermore, Murray maintains that this collective self-understanding, which is based in and arises from the recognition of these “truths,” endows Americans with their identity as a people. It is in this sense that these truths are constitutional: this realist epistemology constitutes us as a people. As Murray argues, in its very declaration of these truths, the Declaration of Independence established the identity of the American people: “It was to this patrimony [the realist epistemology] that the Declaration of Independence referred: “These are the truths we hold.” This is the first utterance of a people. By it a people establishes its identity, and under decent respect to the opinions of mankind declares its purposes within the community of nations.”³⁰ In this way, this act of conscious articulation of these moral truths formed the colonial masses into the American people, according to Murray, because precisely such a declaration is what makes a *community* out of such disorganized, amorphous masses.

Murray’s definition of community from his essay, “Two Concepts of Government,” proves highly instructive for understanding these claims in *WHTT*. There, Murray contrasts amorphous “masses” with a “people”:

The masses are amorphous; their principle of direction is external to themselves. A people is a structured moral community, fashioned by a *consciously shared consensus*; it is capable—both as a collectivity and in its individual members—of protecting its own moral identity and directing its own social life.³¹

²⁸ Ibid., 49-50.

²⁹ Ibid., 50.

³⁰ Ibid., 28.

³¹ John Courtney Murray, “Leo XIII: Two Concepts of Government: Government and the Order of Culture,” *Theological Studies* 15 (March 1954): 32.

As a “structured moral community,” a “people” is a community which acquires the designations by virtue of the degree to which its members collectively and individually are conscious of a certain consensus on basic moral truths. Murray argues that it is specifically this consciousness of the consensus “whereby the people acquires its identity as a people and the society is endowed with its vital form, its entelechy, its sense of purpose as a collectivity organized for action in history.”³² Thus, it is clear that Murray understands a certain consciousness or awareness of agreement on the shared value of some basic truths to be fundamental to the constitution of the American people as a people.

Finally, Murray argues that there is a specifically political dimension to this American collective self-understanding. As noted above, Murray understands a “people” to constitute more than a mere mass or assemblage of individuals, yet he also maintains that a people is not at once the same thing as a political association. And Murray makes clear that it is the nature of the American *political* association that he aims to identify and discuss in *WHTT*. The principle of specific difference of a political association, Murray suggests, is its “rational deliberative quality.”³³ Before elaborating on this understanding of the political, it is crucial at this point to distinguish what Murray means by “political” from what he means by “civil.”

Murray often appears to conflate the two concepts, using them somewhat interchangeably throughout the essays collected in *WHTT*, and it is not easy to pin down the nuances in meaning. On this score, it is helpful to turn to Murray’s citation of Thomas Gilby, O.P.’s interpretation of Thomas Aquinas’s teaching on political community. In doing so, Murray makes clear that he understands *civil* associations to be constituted by groups of individuals who are more than a mere multitude because they “are locked together in argument.” He writes that:

³² Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 26.

³³ *Ibid.*, 24.

I suggest that the immediate question is whether American society is properly civil. The question is intelligible and answerable, because the basic standard of civility is not in doubt; ‘Civilization is formed by men locked together in argument. From this dialogue the community becomes a political community.’ This statement, made by Thomas Gilby, O.P., in *Between Community and Society*, exactly expresses the mind of St. Thomas Aquinas, who was himself giving refined expression to the tradition of classic antiquity, which in its prior turn had given first elaboration to the concept of the civil multitude, the multitude that is not a herd or a huddle, because it is characterized by civility.³⁴

This set of relations structured by “argument” is what makes a multitude of people a properly “civil” association. As the above passage suggests, Murray makes clear that he takes himself to be drawing on an idea central to the tradition of western civilization which passed from “the Stoics and Cicero; through St. Augustine...into the liberal tradition of the West.”³⁵ His favorite authority to cite is St. Thomas Aquinas.

Murray goes on to specify that such a civilized community presupposes the existence of a people who share this consensus focused around the idea of law, that the consensus has a binding force commensurate with its grounding in reality, or the “order of experience.”³⁶ He argues that:

The state of civility supposes a consensus that is constitutional, sic., its focus is the idea of law, as surrounded by the whole constellation of ideas that are related to the *ratio iuris* as its premises, its constituent elements, and its consequences. This consensus is come to by the people; they become a people by coming to it. They do not come to it accidentally, without knowing how, but deliberatively, by the methods of reason reflecting on experience.³⁷

Out of the “dialogue” that forms a civil(ized) community (in the sense of the “Western style of civilization”), a political association can develop.

The key feature a political association for Murray is that it is characterized not just by any argument, but by a sustained, “rational and deliberative” “public argument” which keeps those

³⁴ Ibid., 24. I will discuss at greater length Murray’s use of Thomas Aquinas in section “Epistemological Overlap” below.

³⁵ Ibid., 27-28.

³⁶ Ibid, 27.

³⁷ Ibid.

involved locked in a conversation about public affairs, the quality of the common life, and the constitutional consensus itself.³⁸ Indeed, Murray understands a political association to flow out of such a civil conversation that is grounded in and facilitated by a consensus on certain basic truths. It also crucially involves applying (collective) intellect/reason to the data of the experience of a particular people to decide about how to apply these truths to their particular problems of their particular day. What results from this process is a specifically political association is characterized by a “public argument” about those truths, which is both important in the ongoing constitution of that association, and also serves as evidence of the consensus itself. As Murray succinctly puts the point: “We hold certain truths; therefore we can argue about them.”³⁹

Furthermore, Murray argues that this consensus on some basic truths, and the consciousness that arises from an awareness of them, can neither be accidental, arbitrary, constructed, nor merely record or codify human experience. Rather, the consensus on these truths must be rational and deliberate: it must emerge from collective intelligence reflecting on experience in a way that is able to abstract from this experience truths which “pretend to and possess a certain universal validity.”⁴⁰ Because of this universal validity, then, Murray suggests that it makes sense to say “not only do *we* hold these truths; but they are the truths of a sort that man as such is bound to hold.”⁴¹ Thus, it becomes clear that Murray maintains that a group of people using reason to deliberately reflect on experience structures a people according to a set of consciously shared “philosophical and political” truths yields an association that can be called

³⁸ Ibid., 28.

³⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 88.

⁴¹ Ibid.

properly “political.”⁴² (I understand Murray’s multiple references to “political truths” to refer to those non-contingent truths that have happened to emerge, been articulated in the terms of, and/or been endorsed by, a particular, historical political tradition.)

However, Murray’s claim about the rational and deliberate character of political association does not mean that Murray fails to appreciate the organic and historical dimensions of human communities and associations. He writes:

I am not, of course, maintaining that civil society is a purely rational form of association. . . . Civil society is a need of human nature before it becomes the object of human choice. Moreover, every particular society is a creature of the soil; it springs from the physical soil of the earth and from the more formative soil of history. Its existence is sustained by loyalties that are not logical; its ideals are expressed in legends that go beyond the facts and are for that reason vehicles of truth; its cohesiveness depends in no small part on the materialisms of property and interest. Though all this is true, nevertheless the distinctive bond of the civil multitude is reason, or more exactly, that exercise of reason which is argument.⁴³

In this way, Murray clearly recognizes the rational as well as the historical, material, and organic forces that form a community, not discounting any one of them in his theory. Nevertheless, he maintains that the specific difference of a political association remains its rational, deliberative quality that accompanies sustained “argument” about the way the truths of the consensus should impact public affairs. For Murray, politics is a matter of dialogue.

Unfortunately, Murray could be much clearer regarding the form of this “dialogue” or “argument” as well as regarding the institutional contexts in which he imagines it taking place. For his part, Murray is clear that the three major *themes* of this public argument are: 1) “the matters that are for the advantage of the republic” that require the transformation of “brute facts into arguable issues,” 2) “the affairs of the commonwealth...that fall...beyond the limited scope of government...[and] bear upon the quality of the common life,” including education, and 3) the

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 25.

constitutional consensus itself.⁴⁴ Yet, it is not always clear whether he imagines a literal conversation about public affairs between individuals in some public forum or fora (school board meetings?, bowling leagues? in the press?), or whether he uses the expression in a more metaphorical sense to describe the complex process of interpreting and applying the truths of the American Consensus (as they are developed and elaborated by the wise, more on which below) to all of society's institutions they respond to the problems of the day. On my reading, the passage cited above suggests a capacious understanding of "public argument" that includes both of these readings.

Part of this ambiguity in Murray's discussion of the "public argument" may arise from the fact that he defines the *identity* of the American people, in large part, in terms of this *public argument*. On the face of it, it is odd to define a people's identity in terms of an argument. Nevertheless, for Murray, the American people simply are those who identify with this ensemble of "truths" enough to engage in all that is involved in claiming them as their own and trying to instantiate them in their society, as best they can. Because there will be disagreement among those who identify with these truths on how to apply them to pressing social problems, Murray describes this dynamic as an argument. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that this effort seems to require both literal conversations with one's compatriots about one or another public matters (the economy, schools), but also the participation in a larger, ongoing "dialogue" about how to understand the American Consensus and apply its truths to society writ large.

In sum: Murray suggests that the American collective self-understanding involves the consciousness of an "ensemble of substantive truths" that constitutes Americans into a collective with an "identity as a people" that understands itself to be "organized for action in history," and

⁴⁴ Ibid., 26.

that, as such, is an ongoing condition of possibility of the rational and deliberative “public argument” about those truths and their application to the problems of the day that constitutes Americans into a specifically political association. Yet, it is crucial to note one further point: despite the fact that Murray most often describes this collective self-understanding as the “public” or “American consensus,” it is *expressly not* majority opinion.⁴⁵ Rather, Murray uses the word “consensus” in a very particular sense. As he puts it:

These usages, however valid elsewhere, are departures from the technical constitutional sense that the word bears in the Western tradition.

I would maintain, for instance, that the public consensus of the West, and of the United States as a historic participant in the Western style of civilization, would remain the public consensus, even if it were held, as perhaps it is held, only by a minority within the West. The validity of the consensus is radically independent of its possible status as either majority or minority opinion. Moreover, the Declaration of Independence did not hazard the conjecture: “This is the convergent trend of opinion among us...” It made the affirmation “We hold these truths...” Or in the equivalent formula: “This is the public consensus...”⁴⁶

The “public consensus” names the specific and characteristic “intellectual heritage” of the “Western style of civilization.”⁴⁷ As such, it is a stable yet dynamic body of political and moral doctrine, a “historical process” in “the West” that has developed over a long period of time, that has gained general acceptance and that continues to have a “growing end” at which it may develop and deepen.⁴⁸

This point could not be more crucial to the argument at hand, because it means that the American collective self-understanding, the “intellectual heritage” of the West as it expresses itself in American political life, is at constant risk:

⁴⁵ Ibid., 101. Despite the fact that Walzer, in his appeal to “shared understandings,” and Murray, in his appeal to “the American Consensus,” both see the collective self-understanding of a people as playing a crucial role in the constitution of a given nation or people, Murray’s view differs to the extent that he clearly maintains that these shared understandings must have a certain, non-negotiable content. Where Walzer seems to be concerned that the understandings in question are “shared,” Murray is concerned that these understandings are *both shared and* “true.”

⁴⁶ Ibid., 101-102.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 101-105.

The consensus is an intellectual heritage; it may be lost to mind or deformed in the mind. Its final depository is the public mind. This is indeed a perilous place to deposit what ought to be kept safe; for the public mind is exposed to the corrosive rust of skepticism, to the predatory moths of deceitful doxai (in Plato's sense), and to the incessant thieves of forgetfulness.⁴⁹

Murray suggests that, deposited in the collective mind of the American Public, the consensus is subject to skepticism, myths, and forgetfulness. There are numerous ways in which it may be eclipsed.

An Eclipse of Self-Understanding

Murray collects the essays contained in *WHITT* deeply worried about such an Eclipse. He fears that America, as a collectivity, is barely conscious of these foundational beliefs—it has lost sight of the truths it holds. (One might even say held, as Murray expresses his skepticism that Americans any longer share any of these truths in the mid-century United States in which he was writing.)⁵⁰ Or, to use another of Murray's idioms: America barely understands itself. We are a community who has nearly lost the sense of who we are. Murray warns that:

What is at stake is America's understanding of itself. Self-understanding is the necessary condition of a sense of self-identity and self-confidence, whether in the case of an individual or in the case of a people. If the American people can no longer base this sense on naïve assumptions of self-evidence, it is imperative that they find other more reasoned grounds for their essential affirmation that they are uniquely a people, uniquely a free society. Otherwise the peril is great. The complete loss of one's identity is, with all propriety of theological definition, hell. In diminished forms it is insanity. And it would not be well for the American giant to go lumbering around the world today, lost and mad.⁵¹

Insane, mad, lost and lumbering around the world without an identity, steps away from the gates of hell: this is the future that confronts the United States in Murray's estimation. He worries that

⁴⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁰ Ibid., see p. 86 for his discussion of the erosion of the public consensus.

⁵¹ Ibid., 24.

because America in the mid-twentieth century is not sufficiently conscious of the truths that that have constituted Americans as a people and the United States into a political association, we are therefore seriously at risk of ceasing to be a “people” with an identity who can act as a collective with a sense of purpose, and therefore also act in the mode characterized as a “civil” political association. We risk being no longer organized for action in history, least of all informed by rational deliberation. In short, Murray warns that *the collective consciousness* of the American consensus has been eclipsed.

I believe that Murray’s claim about this near loss of collective self-understanding can be helpfully unpacked by using Dewey’s notion of a Public in Eclipse, as discussed in Chapter 1. Regarding Dewey’s theory, recall that Dewey defines the Public as the association that emerges through the reality of combined action that affects people beyond those immediately involved, and that he argues that for such a Public to become a truly democratic, self-governing collective, its members must be able to reflect on the consequences of these collective actions and make individual and collective decisions in light of their membership in this Public. Further recall that an Eclipse of the Public describes a situation in which forces impede such intelligent reflection on the consequences of combined action, thus impeding this democratic consciousness. In the face of such Eclipse, Dewey thinks that the right kind of actors invoking the right kinds of signs and symbols, ones which attach individual wants and impulses to common meanings, will enable such reflection and transform such individual desires and purposes into desires and purposes that are shared

While Dewey develops this theory with an eye to the Eclipse of the Public by the technological and industrial developments of the machine age, I argue that one can productively apply the framework of Eclipse to help make sense of Murray’s overriding concern in *WHITT*. In

short, Murray aims to diagnose and counteract an Eclipse of those signs and symbols which enable the American Public to engage in the kind of the community-constituting, rational deliberation Murray deems so essential.⁵² To put it in both Dewey's and Murray's terms: the consciously held consensus on certain truths that constitutes us as both a people and makes possible our political association has been (nearly) eclipsed by key forces of modernity. In doing so, these forces threaten the very constitution of American democracy.

Specifically, Murray argues that this consciousness has been eclipsed by what I will call two major "forces of modernity." These forces are 1) the fact of religious pluralism (a regrettable but inescapable fact, according to Murray), which fractures this consciousness into experiences of intellectual confusion and historical difference, and 2) a certain family of political and spiritual monisms, which only offer a kind unity that is hostile to a religiously plural society (which Murray thinks America has been since its inception). On the surface, it is rather surprising that Murray identifies both pluralism *and* monism as the twin dangers facing American democracy. One would think that if pluralism posed a danger, monism would fix it, and vice versa. Yet, Murray does not view these two forces of modernity as posing the same kind of threat to the American self-understanding. While he understands the monisms in question to necessarily threaten the American collective self-understanding (which is fundamentally pluralist), he views the threats posed by religious pluralism only to pose a contingent threat. Nevertheless, Murray suggests that each of these forces does pose a threat to the self-consciousness which is America's democratic inheritance: the truths that we hold and the public argument that the consensus on them can facilitate, and thus our very constitution as a people.

⁵² There is a parallel here between the role of reason and intellect in Murray's theory of political constitution, and the role of intelligence in Dewey's theory of the same.

Murray warns that religious pluralism, as a pluralism, challenges the measure of unity afforded by the American consensus. Yet, at the same time, he argues that religious pluralism was and is the “native condition” of American society.⁵³ He suggests that this condition has made the American experience unique from the European one, in particular by creating new possibilities for structuring the relationship between religion and politics in the United States. Murray argues that, because it was a structural condition of American society in the colonial period onward, such religious pluralism was an important historical condition of possibility for the emergence of the American consensus as expressed, for example, in the American Constitution and Bill of Rights.⁵⁴ Religious pluralism as a “native condition,” is a primary factor in the development of the American consensus we inherit. The fact of religious pluralism is part of the set of “problems” to which the American Consensus emerged as an answer.

While Murray maintains that the American collective self-understanding arose out of and in response to a certain level of religious and philosophical diversity in colonial America, he does not think that it posed any severe challenge to the consensus until much more recently. In fact, he argues that the religious pluralism that has come to characterize the twentieth century United States threatens the consciousness of the consensus in a new way. Murray defines religious pluralism in this context as “the coexistence within the one political community of groups who hold divergent and incompatible views with regard to religious questions—those ultimate questions that concern the nature and destiny of man within a universe that stands under the reign of God.”⁵⁵ With regard to the United States of the 1950s and 1960s, Murray identifies what he calls “a pattern of interacting conspiracies” that characterize the landscape of religious

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii.

pluralism: Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Secularism.⁵⁶ Murray hopes to use the term “conspiracy” without the negative connotations we might commonly associate with it, instead appealing to what he calls “its Latin sense” in order to achieve “the connotation of united action for a common end about which there is agreement; those who think alike inevitably join together in some manner of action to make their thought or purpose prevail.”⁵⁷ Thus, it is clear that Murray sees each of these major religious traditions in the United States functioning as a “conspiracy” in this way: they are united in action for a commonly agreed upon goal or purpose. Each tradition is, in an important sense, of one mind, and can and therefore act toward a common end. This is well and good as far as it goes.

However, Murray also notes that, ironically, this kind of religious pluralism also remains a perennial threat to this American consensus, because it threatens to lead people to the conclusion that we hold no beliefs in common, and therefore cannot act together at all. Specifically, Murray worries that “the twofold experience of the religiously plural society” in the United States has led many Americans to precisely this conclusion because it entails both the intellectual experience of confusion and the interpersonal experience of historical difference.⁵⁸ And this experience has arisen, according to Murray, because the political sphere—where we discuss our common problems and hammer out solutions—necessarily traverses both the theoretical/general and the historical/particular.

On the one hand, as we discuss the public affairs and engage in civil discourse, we make recourse to general, theoretical, terms (like those of metaphysics, ethics, and theology) in order

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ It is worth noting Murray’s emphasis on the *experience* of religious pluralism. By focusing on the affective dimension of living in a religiously diverse society, Murray avoids committing himself to a claim about the absolute difference or final incommensurability of the traditions in question. Rather, he appears to take a more melioristic view, as his analysis seems to suggest that we experience greater intellectual confusion and/or historical difference than is entirely justified by the facts in front of us.

to try to discuss with our fellow compatriots matters of public concern. And in this order, Murray maintains that the fact of religious pluralism causes such efforts to yield the experience of intellectual confusion:

The first experience is intellectual. As we discourse on public affairs, on the affairs of the commonwealth, and particularly on the problem of consensus, we inevitably have to move upward, as it were, into realms of some theoretical generality—into metaphysics, ethics, theology. This movement does not carry us into disagreement; for disagreement is not an easy thing to reach. Rather, *we move into confusion*. Among us there is a plurality of universes of discourse, these universes are incommensurable. And when they clash, the issue of agreement or disagreement tends to become irrelevant. *The immediate situation is simply one of confusion. One does not know what the other is talking about.*⁵⁹

Furthermore, Murray argues that this confusion occurs because we use render our shared general concepts and terms in plural, if not in radically different, ways:

This is the pluralist society as it is encountered on the level of intellectual experience. We have no common universe of discourse. In particular, *diverse mental equivalents attach to all the words in which the constitutional consensus must finally be discussed*—truth, freedom, justice, prudence, order, law, authority, power, knowledge, certainty, unity, peace, virtue, morality, religion, God, and perhaps even man. Our intellectual experience is one of sheer confusion, in which soliloquy succeeds to argument.⁶⁰

This experience of feeling confused, the feeling that we do not know what our compatriots are talking about, is the first characteristic experience of religious pluralism.

On the other hand, the very same discussions leave us “aware that only in a limited sense have we severally had the same history.” Murray points out that “we more or less share the short segment of history known as America. But all of us have had longer histories, spiritual and intellectual.”⁶¹ Murray suggests that we become, as he puts it, “conscious” that American Jews and American Christians do not share the same history, that there are only limited parallels between that of Catholic Americans and Protestant Americans, and that Secularist Americans are

⁵⁹ Ibid., 32, emphases added.

⁶⁰ Ibid., emphasis added.

⁶¹ Ibid.

“latecomers” whose history is both much shorter and decidedly provincial.⁶² He argues that it is this “fact of our discrepant histories [that] creates the second experience of the pluralist society. We are aware that we not only hold different views but have become *different kinds of men* as we have lived our several histories. Our styles of thought and of interior life are as discrepant as our histories.”⁶³ This interpersonal experience of historical difference, the experience of realizing that our compatriots share different histories from our own which have, in part, made them into radically different Americans than we are, is the second characteristic experience of religious pluralism.

Murray suggests that these two experiences combine to threaten our consciousness of the American Consensus in an important way. Instead of a consciousness of the truths we hold (or held) in common that constitut(ed) us, we have developed a false consciousness that tells us that we share little or nothing with those with whom we find ourselves in community.⁶⁴ In this way, these harrowing experiences of confusion and difference threaten to eclipse, or indeed have eclipsed, the consciousness that characterizes the American consensus. We feel as if the truths *they* hold are simply different than the truths *we* hold.

So, we conclude that all we can do is *fight* with them. And Murray suggests that, when we feel that intellectual relations with our compatriots have become impossible due to (apparently) unbridgeable differences in the order of truth, we default to sorting out our differences in the order of power. When we do so, we mistake the secondary fact that religious groups exercise *power* and use it to pursue their interests in society, for the primary fact that the

⁶² Ibid., 33.

⁶³ Ibid., emphasis added.

⁶⁴ Note that in the quote above Murray is careful not to deny that each of the “conspiracies” share any history at all. Instead, he points out in passing that these different religious traditions do “share the short segment of history known as America.”

American Consensus involves a civil conversation premised on certain *truths*. Then the religiously plural American society becomes, or has become, ordered by what Murray calls a “Structure of War,” and so too the American collective self-understanding.⁶⁵ This order is one which understands the passions to necessarily take priority over the intellect. Americans then primarily understand the United States to be constituted of religious groups that are “entrenched as social powers,” who have “developed interests...and possess the means to fight for them.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, Murray warns of the self-righteousness that accompanies this order: “to each group...its influence seems salvific; to other groups it may seem merely imperialist.”⁶⁷ In this way, Murray suggests that the doubly-bewildering intellectual and interpersonal experience of religious pluralism in American society threatens the consciousness that characterizes the American Consensus by structuring the American collective self-understanding according to a “structure of war” based on the primary interpretations of our compatriots as interest groups exercising social power to pursue those interests.

Murray, for his part, does think there is a solution to be had to the problem of religious pluralism. He suggests that the solution involves making one larger, though imperfect, “conspiracy” out of the four “conspiracies” mentioned above, which would involve “public argument” instead of such power struggles, and thus be characterized by a structure of *peace* instead of war. We could then engage in *dialogue* instead of warfare.⁶⁸ As he suggests, “We cannot hope to make American society the perfect conspiracy based on a unanimous consensus. But we could at least do two things. We could limit the warfare, and we could enlarge the dialogue. We could lay down our arms (at least the more barbarous kinds of arms!), and we

⁶⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁸ It is precisely such dialogical dynamics that I aim to highlight throughout this project.

could take up argument.”⁶⁹ And he thinks that a renewal/revival of the consciousness of the American Consensus will help Americans accomplish that feat.⁷⁰ I will turn more fully to Murray’s constructive proposal for overcoming this Eclipse in the following section.

However, before moving onto Murray’s proposal for moving American society out of this state of Eclipse, we must briefly consider a second dimension of the Eclipse that Murray understands to be threatening American democracy. Murray also suggests that the American Consensus faces Eclipse by a pernicious kind of political monism that pretends to solve the problem, while not actually solving the problem and actively undermining a key feature of the American Consensus: its conception of a “free people under limited government” and the related distinction between the State and society.⁷¹

If religious pluralism has threatened, or even undermined, the unity afforded by the American consensus, Murray is well aware that other forms of unity may fill the vacuum and take its place. He spends much of his time speaking and writing at pains to warn Americans off a family of problematic kinds of unity which appear especially appealing in the twentieth century, yet threaten to usurp key features of the American consensus. While the phenomena and the names Murray gives to them are multiple and nuanced, in *We Hold These Truths*, he refers to this problematic kind of unity most broadly as “the political experiment of modernity.”

He suggests that various political movements and developments over the course of the past few centuries can fundamentally be characterized by a *political and spiritual monism* that rejects “the Gelasian thesis” of Pope Gelasius I by recognizing only one authority in society: that of the State. If the motto of the Gelasian thesis is “Two there are,” Murray argues that the motto

⁶⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 47, 50, 79.

of political modernity is “One there is.”⁷² Murray identifies this monistic threat as present in many historical forms, including the Democratic Totalitarianism of the French Jacobin Revolutionaries, twentieth century Totalitarianism in Europe, Communism in the Soviet Union and Asia, as well as in the Technological Secularism present in many of these regimes, and that is also advocated by many American progressives.⁷³

This is the case because the American self-understanding, as Murray describes it, presumes a dualistic (or even pluralistic) picture of sources of authority in society, not a monistic one. I will examine Murray’s historical and genealogical argument about how this dualism became embedded in the American self-understanding at length below.⁷⁴ At this point, it is sufficient to note that Murray understands this dualistic (or pluralistic) picture, in which the authority of religious institutions and associations is recognized as not being subsumed under that of the state, to be a direct legacy of the Christian idea of the “freedom of the Church” to operate in society to fulfill her divine mission.⁷⁵

This freedom, Murray suggests, has two key dimensions. First, “the freedom of the church as a spiritual authority,” to care for souls. Second, “the freedom of the Church as Christian people—their freedom to have access to the teaching of the Church, to obey her laws, to receive at her hands the sacramental ministry of grace, and to live within her fold an integral supernatural life.”⁷⁶ Murray argues that it is this understanding of the church as “free” to operate in earthly society in these ways that has left the liberal tradition of the West with a fundamentally

⁷² Ibid., 190.

⁷³ For discussion of the “political experiment of modernity” see *We Hold These Truths* p. 186-199, for “communism” see pp. 208-215,” and “democratic monism” pp. 192-194. For a discussion of “totalitarian democracy” see also “The Church and Totalitarian Democracy” (1952), and for “technological secularism” see “Return to Tribalism” (1961).

⁷⁴ See section below entitled “Historical-Genealogical Overlap.”

⁷⁵ Murray bases this claim in his understanding of Gelasius I, Leo XIII, Pius XII and centuries of Christian tradition, including how it informed the “liberal tradition of the West.”

⁷⁶ Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 187-88.

dualistic legacy, and that this legacy has been instrumental in securing the freedom and flourishing of human beings living in such societies.

Given this fact, the various monisms of “political modernity” threaten to eclipse this dualistic/pluralist collective self-understanding and threaten the freedom and flourishing of those living in the United States. As Murray puts it:

My generalization will be that the political experiment of modernity has essentially consisted in an effort to find and install in the world a secular substitute for all that the Christian tradition has meant by the pregnant phrase, the “freedom of the Church.” My first assertion will be that this freedom, though not a freedom of the political order, was Christianity’s basic contribution to freedom in the political order...Second, I shall say that modernity dropped the phrase out of its political vocabulary, and eliminated the things from its political edifice and installed in its place a secular surrogate, with results that we now begin to see. Thirdly I shall attempt to identify some of the more acute stresses and distresses now being experienced at our present stage, the term of the modern experiment. Finally, I shall attempt to state some of the spiritual issues which lie, I think, at the origin of our empirical malaises.⁷⁷

The nuances of each of modernity’s monisms are significant for Murray but remain beyond the scope of the present analysis. It is sufficient to note Murray’s basic and characteristic claim that Catholic teaching and Christian tradition have contributed to a millennia-old strain in Western social imaginations and social order that understands human communities in the world to be organized by a fundamental dualism and furthermore expressly rejects a monistic picture.

Furthermore, Murray worries that moderns have largely endorsed such a monistic understanding of the structure of society. He writes that:

It has been specific of modernity to regard the state as a moral end in itself, a self-justifying entity with its own self-determined spiritual substance. It is within the secular state, and by appeal to secular sources, that man is to find the interpretation of his own nature and the means to his own destiny. The state itself creates the ethos of society, embodies it, imparts it to its citizens, and sanctions its observance with rewards and punishments.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Ibid., 186

⁷⁸ Ibid., 193.

It is this monistic and modern self-understanding of the singular and exclusive omnipotence of the State that Murray thinks is at odds with the collective self-understanding that constituted (and constitutes) Americans as a people organized for action in history.

Now we are in a position to observe the full force of that the Eclipse of the American Consensus by these forces of modernity has for American democracy. Murray suggests that this Eclipse threatens American democracy in at least three ways. First, Murray's analysis suggests that this Eclipse threatens American's ability to use (collective) intelligence to solve the common problems that are properly the task of politics. Both the experience of religious pluralism as well as the political and spiritual monisms that are part and parcel of modernity impede Americans' ability to consciously appropriate and appeal to the American Consensus which they inherit. While the experience of intellectual confusion and interpersonal difference bewilders many into thinking that there *can be no* consensus and encourages them to resort to the game theory calculations of power-politics, modernity's political monisms tempt Americans to replace the American tradition of pluralism with an all-too-convenient monism that would solve the problem of difference through sheer unanimity (if not mere hegemony), not consensus.

Second, in doing so, these forces of modernity threaten American's very constitution as a people organized for action in history because the constitution of the American people as a people is based on the consciousness of the Consensus that is being eclipsed. Absent a clear sense of the identity that characterizes Americans as a people organized for action in history, not only will the American body politic become disorganized, it will not be able to act. Murray suggests that will not be able to use collective intelligence to engage in the kind of dialogue necessary to solve the collective problems that the American public faces. The United States will, to recall Murray's turn of phrase, lumber around the world as if we were "lost and mad."

Third, the Eclipse of the American consensus by these forces of modernity means that Americans are not, or will no longer be, able to engage in the “public argument” of a “rational and deliberative quality” that Murray thinks characterizes a specifically political association. He suggests that, by threatening the inherited American collective self-understanding, the forces of modernity threaten to end the American experiment in pluralistic democracy by turning the American people into a collectivity that is unconscious of the truths that constitute it, and as a result, can no longer use its collective intelligence to deliberate and dialogue in order to act in the world to solve the problems it faces. By encouraging Americans to lose sight of who they are as a people—to deny that their collective selfhood—the forces of modernity threaten the American people’s very ability to engage in the kind of self-rule that democracy requires. After all, as Murray suggests, only a self can engage in the project of self-rule.

An Overlapping Self-Interpretation

Nevertheless, Murray believes this Eclipse can be overcome, and he aims to help restore the American collective self-understanding that has been eclipsed. To help combat the Eclipse of this consensus and promote this public argument, Murray offers America in his social criticism an overlapping self-interpretation in both American-democratic and Catholic Christian terms. Murray uses the (decidedly, though not exclusively) Catholic language of natural law to help him identify and describe the humanistic axiology which he takes to be a part of both the Catholic and the American tradition, thinks is readily available to any person who uses reason to reflect on human experience, and argues are the only possible truths that can ground a public “conversation” (i.e. identity, collective self-understanding) in a religiously diverse, modern democracy.

By describing this humanistic axiology in overlapping terms, Murray hopes to work toward overcoming both aspects of the Eclipse described above. First, he hopes to rejuvenate the traditional, pluralistic, American collective self-understanding over and against the creep of modernity's various political and spiritual monisms. Second, he hopes to replace the "structure of war" paradigm of religious pluralism with the paradigm of a "civil conversation," "public argument" and "dialogue" and grounded in and facilitated by a consciousness of the American consensus.⁷⁹

To do so, Murray inaugurates a consciousness-raising program. He does so because he maintains that "the consensus can only be preserved in the public mind by argument. High argument alone will keep it alive, in the vital state of being 'held.'"⁸⁰ Therefore, Murray expresses hope that a consciousness-raising program to promote those truths at the heart of the American consensus will be able to restore the place of those truths in the "public mind." He hopes to contribute to the rejuvenation of Americans' consciousness of these truths as their patrimony—including the humanistic axiology they imply—and thereby facilitate this kind of "public argument," which will keep these truths "held" by the American public.

Murray hopes that the essays collected in *WHTT* will begin this consciousness-raising work, and he is clear about his consciousness-raising intentions. As he states in the preface:

Today therefore thoughtful men among us are saying that America must be more clearly *conscious* of what it proposes, *articulate* in proposing, more *purposeful* in the realization of the project proposed.

This is my excuse, if excuse be needed, for editing and collecting in this volume a series of essays that were done over the past decade. Their thread of unity is an effort to explore the content, the foundations, the mode of formation, the validity, etc., of the American Proposition, or as it is otherwise called, with nuances of meaning, the public consensus or the public philosophy of America. There is some argument in these pages about the Proposition—in its uniqueness, in its continuity with, and progress over, the longer civilizational tradition of the West, in certain of its applications, and in some of its

⁷⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 28.

problematic aspects. In particular, I have felt obliged, as others have, to raise the question, whether and to what extent this nation, now no longer new, still remains dedicated to the conception of itself that first constituted us as a people organized for action in history.⁸¹

Murray thus makes plain that he is offering his overlapping interpretations in order to help raise this consciousness and make the American public more aware of, articulate about, and purposeful in realizing the American Proposition. He hopes he can raise his readers' consciousness to the truths at the heart of the American consensus and, in doing so, spur them to rededicate themselves to this American "conversation."

In particular, Murray hopes his project will help mobilize American Catholics and spur them to act in defense of the American political arrangement, which Murray argues is uniquely hospitable to Catholics, the teachings of the Church, and human beings more generally. As he writes that the Catholic "must recognize that a new problem has been put to the universal Church by the American doctrine and project in the matter of pluralism, as stated in the First Amendment. The conceptual equipment for dealing with the problem is by no mean lacking to the Catholic intelligence."⁸² Murray hopes that his overlapping interpretations in *WHITT* demonstrate that the Catholic intellectual tradition offers resources for meeting problems of modernity which the American political tradition already endorses, if not presumes. He hopes that doing so will help Americans generally and Catholics in particular contribute to overcoming the Eclipse of this project by the forces of modernity and help to reconstitute the American public as a people that is organized for action in history, and characterized by the rational and deliberative quality of public argument. Acting as a Prophet of the Public, his consciousness-raising efforts are designed to help America meet her current problems by calling Americans to

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, xii, emphases added.

⁸² *Ibid.*, xv.

embrace those parts of its traditional, inherited, collective self-understanding that overlap with Catholic doctrine.

Murray's Overlapping Interpretations

Two Kinds of Overlap

Borrowed from the Declaration of Independence, the title of *We Hold These Truths* is thought-provoking and evocative. It is also ambiguous, perhaps intentionally so. Who exactly is the “we” here? And which “truths” exactly does this “we” hold? Perhaps the “we” refers just to Catholics and the “truths” to only that part of Catholic doctrine that bears on American politics. In this case, Murray might be interpreted as explaining what Catholics believe and how it pertains to American politics, during the year when America elected her first Roman Catholic president. This is certainly the case. Yet, the “we” might be read in a more inclusive sense. Murray works in *WHITT* to highlight those truths which *all* Americans can and must “hold” as a prerequisite of the political order which they inherit. *We hold these particular truths*. In this case, Murray may be read as suggesting that these are the only truths that have, and can promise to, make the American experiment work. And there is even a third, more universal sense, in which the “we” might be understood to simply be humanity as such.

I suspect Murray intends all of the above meanings. First, Murray clearly aims to explain how Catholic teaching bears on American politics, and by extension, how Catholics can be unreservedly American. As Murray puts it:

The point here is that Catholic participation in the American consensus has been full and free, unreserved and unembarrassed, because the contents of this consensus—the ethical and political principles drawn from the tradition of natural law—approve themselves to the Catholic intelligence and conscience. Where this kind of language is talked, the Catholic joins the conversation with complete ease. It is his language. The ideas

expressed are native to his own universe of discourse. Even the accent, being American, suits his tongue.⁸³

Second, Murray is not only concerned with interpreting Catholic doctrine for American Catholics. More deeply, he understands himself to be pointing out an overlap between Catholic and American doctrine that is the inheritance of all Americans, regardless of religious affiliation, and is moreover essential for making the American experiment work. Third, Murray argues not only that *both Americans and Catholics* hold some of the same truths, but he also suggests that their point of overlap are on certain truths that are truly universal, even if they are expressed in a particular American idiom. He writes: “Not only do *we* hold these truths; but they are the truths of a sort that man as such is bound to hold.”⁸⁴

Murray’s method of specifying and defending these claims in *WHTT* is to argue that the Catholic tradition and American political tradition are both inheritors and perpetuators of the “tradition of reason,” also known as the “natural law.” Indeed, Murray describes his project as providing as an “account of the [American] consensus in its relation to natural law.”⁸⁵ In doing so, he argues that certain beliefs required by Catholic Christianity overlap with those required by the American, democratic political tradition. Furthermore, he argues that they do so in particular on their respective theological and political anthropologies: they both require belief in the value of the human person—what I refer to as their shared, humanistic axiology. Murray offers two major, sustained arguments in defense of this thesis. To bring these overlaps into full view, it bears examining both the method and content of each them: The first is a historical-genealogical argument; the second is an epistemological argument.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

Historical-Genealogical Overlap

The first argument is historical and genealogical, and to the extent that it succeeds on those fronts, also descriptive. It can be summarized as follows: we hold these truths because they are our patrimony as Americans and as inheritors of the “western” style of political order, one that has been deeply influenced by Christian understandings of human nature and the natural law. In short: they are ours. In making this claim, Murray suggests that the American political tradition is related to Catholic and Christian ideas in at least two ways.

First, Murray argues that the American political tradition is *historically* connected to the Catholic tradition of natural law because it was formed during a time when the tradition of natural rights and natural law thinking were widespread in American colonial culture. Murray thinks that the American collective self-understanding and concomitant political tradition is in continuity with the “political tradition of the West” not only because it generally recognizes a sovereign God to which the nation is accountable. More specifically than that, Murray suggests that the whole project is imbued with a certain natural law sensibility, which it absorbed from the historical currents of the era in which it developed. In explaining the Bishops’ words from the 1884 meeting of American Catholic Bishops in Baltimore, Murray argues as follows:

In 1884 the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore made this statement: “We consider the establishment of our country’s independence, the shaping of its liberties and laws, as a work of special Providence, its framers ‘building better than they knew,’ the Almighty’s hand guiding them.” The providential aspect of the matter, and the reason for the better building, can be found in the fact that the American political community was organized in an era when the tradition of natural law and natural rights was still vigorous. Claiming no sanction other than its appeal to free minds, it still commanded universal acceptance. And it furnished the basic materials for the American consensus.⁸⁶

By arguing the American consensus was formed by the historical forces and currents of the era in which it was conceived and formulated, Murray suggests that the American consensus and the

⁸⁶ Ibid., 46.

Catholic, Christian tradition of natural law bear a certain historical relation to one another: namely, that the American consensus, in its historical dimension, is a product of the intellectual currents of its historical period of formation. It is a product of its day, one where natural rights thinking was, according to Murray, commonplace.

Second, and in a stronger sense, Murray argues that the American political tradition is *genealogically* connected to the Catholic tradition of natural law. He argues that the Enlightenment and rationalist ideas which influenced the American founders are direct descendants of Christian understandings of a created, dignified human being, whose creation and dignity grounds rights which governments must respect. As he puts it:

The philosophy of the Bill of Rights was also tributary to the tradition of natural law, to the idea that man has certain original responsibilities precisely as man, antecedent to his status as citizen. These responsibilities are creative of rights which inhere in man antecedent to any act of government; therefore they are not granted by government and they cannot be surrendered to government. They are as inalienable as they are inherent. Their proximate source is in nature, and in history insofar as history bears witness to the nature of man; their ultimate source, as the Declaration of Independence states, is in God, the Creator of nature and the Master of history... Behind it one can see, not the philosophy of the Enlightenment but the older philosophy that had been the matrix of the common law. The “man” whose rights are guaranteed in the face of law and government is, whether he knows it or not, the Christian man, who had learned to know his own personal dignity in the school of Christian faith.⁸⁷

Murray’s key claim here is that the philosophical underpinnings of the American political tradition are more than incidentally shared with that of those of Catholic thinking about political order. They both are grounded in a conception of a pre-political, dignified human being who has pre-political rights based on this status. Murray suggests that this political anthropology of the American political tradition has a Christian genealogy; it descended from a pre-Enlightenment, Christian theological anthropology.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 51-53.

Furthermore, as the above passage suggests, Murray argues that the key idea connecting medieval, Christian ideas of the natural law and the American consensus as we inherit it, is the “debased” theory of the “law of nature” which Murray takes to be characteristic of Enlightenment thought. He claims that the Enlightenment era political philosophy and the many revolutions it inspired, undergirded, and justified both presumed and relied upon a theory of the “law of nature.” Murray maintains that Enlightenment philosophers arrived at these theories by postulating and constructing a pre-political situation called the “state of nature,” which “was an imaginary state that was nevertheless supposed theoretically to have existed. It depicted what man was and how he lived antecedently to the formation of all human communities and to the establishment of all the laws and customs of social life.”⁸⁸ Furthermore, Murray argues that the concept furnished a theory of political constitution: “to explain, in conjunction with the theory of the social contract, the genesis of political society, its form, and the relative rights of government and citizen.”⁸⁹

Murray takes John Locke’s political philosophy as the case in point for the kind of theory he has in mind and aims to critique. It is important to note that Murray refers to the relevant part of Locke’s theory as the *law of nature*, specifically to distinguish it from the older, and more Catholic and Christian on Murray’s view, understanding of the *natural law*. Rehearsing Murray’s entire treatment of Locke is beyond the scope of the present point. His main critique amounts to the claim that Locke’s concept of the “state of nature” and the law of nature which it justifies rely on a philosophical anthropology that is hypothetical, counterfactual, and ridiculous. As such, it is *not* in fact a law that can be called in any meaningful sense *natural*. Rather, Murray argues

⁸⁸ Ibid., 273.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

that it is a purely abstract, unnatural, formal, and philosophical construct that is very much of its day.⁹⁰ As Murray puts the point:

This briefly, is Locke's theory of the law of nature, as embracing a theory of natural rights and their inalienability, of the origins of political society, and of the functions and limitations of governmental power—all based, as is clear, on an idea of man. The three characteristics of this system are obvious—its rationalism, individualism, nominalism. *The law of nature, the rights of man, and the origins of society are not derived from what is "real," from the concrete totality of man's nature as it really is.* They are deduced from an abstraction, a fictitious state of nature, a disembodied idea of man that is put forward as "rational" and by that sole title real, whereas it was in effect but a reflex of the socio-philosophical individualism of a superficial age.⁹¹

Furthermore, Murray argues that the resultant political theory that sees human beings as driven into society and cooperation only because they are imagined to be atomized, self-interested, egotistical, and in sole possession of themselves and their property (which Murray calls an "omnipotent sociological monad") results in bad political and social outcomes. Namely, such a theory 1) deprives society of any kind of organic character, insisting on purely contractual relations instead, 2) permits no "autonomous social forms intermediate between the individual and the state, "like the family, Church, occupational group, and 3) completely evacuates the notion of the rights of man, because it permits no real order of rights, rather just "a pattern of power relationships" between wholly sovereign individuals.⁹²

These negative outcomes from implementing Locke's theory in the real world characterize political developments in revolutionary France, according to Murray. However, he argues that older, medieval natural law ideas were so baked into English customs and institutions that:

In England, of course, Locke's individualistic law of nature never had its logical social consequences. There were too many elements of the more human medieval tradition deposited in English institutions, and above all in the English common law, for the

⁹⁰ Ibid., 273-274.

⁹¹ Ibid., 275-276, emphasis added.

⁹² Ibid., 273-279.

inherent consequence of Locke's theory to work itself out; I mean the dissolution of the organic character of the total political relationship and its reduction to the harsh antithesis, individual *versus* state, together with the connected idea of the juridical omnipotence of the state."⁹³

Indeed, as he makes clear in the passage above, Murray believes that the negative consequences of the Enlightenment approach to the "law of nature" are severe. It is also worth noting that Murray credits the "more human medieval tradition" of the natural law for saving England from what he sees as the horrifying fate of France during and after the Enlightenment. Indeed, Murray suggests in the quote above that it is *despite* the threats posed by this dangerous social and political theory that Americans inherit as their patrimony notions of the natural law.

Yet, Murray does not view Locke's theory as totally pernicious. Indeed, he is careful to point out that there is another way that Locke's "law of nature" is tributary to the Christian natural law tradition. To observe this dynamic, he focuses on the *function* of Locke's theory as, not primarily a philosophy, but rather as a political instrument designed to protest against the principle of royal absolutism. On this score, Murray deems Locke's theory an effective protest, but credits its effectiveness not to the content of the theory itself, which is simply false, but rather to way the theory functioned as an act of political protest against the tyrannical use of power, and in doing so, (inadvertently) invoked the tradition of natural law that Murray has in mind:

Against the principle of absolutism—the assertion of the irresponsibility of the king and the unlimited scope of his power—Locke asserted (in debased form) the central medieval tradition of the supremacy of law over government, and of government by law which is reason, not will. Against the central point of divine-right theory—that the monarch's right to rule is inalienable and independent of human agency—he asserted (on philosophically indefensible grounds) the medieval principle that sovereignty is "translated" from the people to the ruler, who is responsible to the people in its exercise and holds title to it only as long as he serves their common good. Finally, against absolute centralization of power in the monarch, he asserted (again on false premises) the medieval doctrine of the right of the people. In other words, though Locke knew only an artificial law of nature, he

⁹³ Ibid., 276-277.

asserted in effect the fundamental positions of the natural-law philosophy of the state that had been the creation of greater minds than his, operating at the center of a tradition to whose periphery he himself had moved. These truths, that were not of Locke's own devising, furnished the essential dynamism of his system. Their truth stood up, in spite of Locke's failure to understand and demonstrate it; and this truth gave them their impact on the political conscience of their time. Not even Locke's narrow individualism, his thin rationalism, and his empty nominalism could quite veil their absolute validity as imperatives of a human reason that has a greater and more universal power than was dreamt of in Locke's philosophy.⁹⁴

In this way, Murray claims that, by propounding his "artificial law of nature," Locke in effect asserted the fundamental positions of Catholic natural law philosophy. By attributing the effectiveness of Locke's theory to its more or less accidental and inherited basis in certain universal imperatives of human reason—the natural law—Murray suggests that the American founders who were so influenced by Locke's ideas as well as similar Enlightenment thinking drew on an intellectual genealogy whose abiding power comes from its *overlap* with certain fundamental truths about human beings recognized in the older, Christian tradition of natural law.

Furthermore, Murray suggests that the relevant idea that has been passed down genealogically through English customs and institutions, as well as through Locke's act of protest, is a philosophical, political, and theological anthropology of inviolable, personal dignity. He writes:

The argument here should be made to include the notion that the whole consensus has its ultimate root in the idea of the sacredness of man, *res sacra homo*. Man has a sacredness of personal dignity which commands the respect of society in all its laws and institutions. His sacredness guarantees him certain immunities and it also endows him with certain empowerments. He may make certain demands upon society and the state which require action in their support, and he may also utter certain prohibitions in the face of society and state. He may validly claim assistance, and with equal validity he may claim to be left alone.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Ibid., 282.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 89.

In doing so, he argues that the American consensus is not only historically connected to the Catholic tradition of natural law, but genealogically as well, and that their point of connection is an overlapping political and theological anthropology which understands humans to be dignified beings, whose dignity grounds rights which governments must respect.

Epistemological Overlap

Murray's second argument is epistemological and normative. It can be summarized as follows: we hold these truths, and we *should* hold these truths, because we know them to be philosophically and politically *true*.⁹⁶ In making this argument, Murray uses the Catholic tradition of natural law, specifically as articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas, in order to explain and demonstrate the ways that the American consensus contains and names certain universal human truths. Namely, he argues that both the American Consensus and Catholic Christianity share a certain realist epistemology, which is at once a humanistic axiology.

Because the American Consensus endorses a realist epistemology, according to Murray, it recognizes an order of truth to which human governments are finally accountable. Furthermore, the American consensus consists of a particular political community's interpretation and statement of these key universal, human truths that are as such constitutional for that political community. He writes that:

The starting point, as I have indicated, is the forthright statement of the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths..." That is to say, we have a public philosophy; as a people, we have come to a consensus. This philosophy is the foundation of our public life; by coming to this consensus we have come to be a people, possessed of an identity. The truths we hold, as a people, belong to the order of philosophical and political truth. (Here I presume that God Himself belongs to the order of reason, in the sense that His existence and sovereignty as the Author of the universe are not inaccessible to human reason.) The truths are the product of reason reflecting on human experience. They are not simply a codification or registration of experience; they are reached by an act of abstraction from experience, which carries the mind of man above the level of

⁹⁶ Ibid., 88.

experience. Hence the affirmation of these truths pretends to and possesses a certain universal validity. Not only do *we* hold these truths; they are human truths of a sort that man as such is bound to hold.⁹⁷

Murray argues that these truths are not only knowable due to the historical and genealogical forces discussed above. He also suggests that, because the political tradition represented by documents such as the Declaration endorse truths that belong to the order of political and philosophical truth, these truths are knowable through the exercise of human reason reflecting on human experience, including political experience. As such, they are truly universal truths: they are in principle knowable always and everywhere, and without a particular religious affiliation or supernatural revelation, to humans who are willing to reflect on the realities of human experience. In this sense Murray truths describes these realities as “natural.”

To do so, he draws on the language and symbolism of the natural law. In fact, Murray’s key strategy for making his point about the American Consensus’s realist epistemology and its grounding in human reason is to interpret it through a Thomistic understanding of natural law. In doing so, he hopes to make plain to all Americans the resources latent in the American Consensus by relating important American-democratic symbols to Catholic and Thomistic ones and thus bringing the resources of the Catholic intellectual tradition to bear on the Eclipse of the American Consensus by the forces of modernity.

Precisely because Murray’s project of social criticism in *WHTT* is designed to raise Americans’ consciousness in a way that makes them aware of the resources latent in the American Consensus for overcoming the challenging forces of modernity, he is careful to point out that the Catholic doctrine of natural law does not require the belief in any particular deities or Christian/Catholic ideas, partaking in the sacraments, or a profession of faith. Rather, it is the

⁹⁷ Ibid.

part of Catholic teaching which characteristically concerns what is knowable “naturally” about human beings, without special revelation.⁹⁸ It pertains to certain human truths, knowable through the exercise of human reason, that necessarily inform how humans ought to act based on their very nature as human beings. Indeed, Murray stresses that:

The doctrine of natural law has no Roman Catholic presuppositions. Its only presupposition is threefold: that man is intelligent; that reality is intelligible; and that reality, as grasped by intelligence, imposes on the will the obligation that it be obeyed in its demands for action or abstention. Even these statements are not properly “presuppositions,” since they are susceptible of verification.⁹⁹

Because it harbors no such Catholic presuppositions, the language of the natural law offers precisely the kind of signs and symbols that he thinks will help to raise diverse Americans’ consciousness to the part of their own political tradition which they seem to have lost connection. Murray suggests that the teaching on the natural law is the part of Catholic doctrine that overlaps most directly, and in a manner most hospitable to the religiously diverse makeup of the United States, with the core doctrines and presuppositions of the tradition of American democracy. The language of natural law helps Murray to make the point that *both* traditions presuppose and require the belief that there is an order of human truth and value to which governments are finally accountable, and that these truths are knowable through reason reflecting on experience.

Indeed, Murray suggests that the key features of the American Consensus lend themselves to interpretation through the doctrine of natural law. As a “non-contingent element of thought” that enables Americans to evaluate and “pass judgments on facts” in order to “systematize” experience and thus guide it towards the proper social ends, thus affecting “the

⁹⁸ Ibid., 294.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 111. Though there are also important differences, there is a striking parallel here between these Murray’s three “presuppositions” of the natural law and the philosophical premises which Dewey says underlie his political theory in *The Public and Its Problems*, namely: both suggest that there is some readily intelligible reality in the world that human intelligence/reason can perceive, and which, when it does, directly engages the will to spur collective action toward desired ends.

substance of society,” the American consensus is ultimately a public and moral experience, according to Murray.¹⁰⁰ As such, it implies a moral theory, and Murray suggests that only the theory of natural law can make sense of this public and moral experience:

There is not likely to be much resistance to the notion that the public consensus has the character of a moral experience that is public. There is, however, the further question, in terms of what theory of morality is this moral experience, and its publicity, to be understood and explained. Every moral experience assumes intelligibility only in terms of a moral theory. And a moral theory, if it is to be any good, must be able to give an account of every manner of moral experience.

My proposition is that only the theory of natural law is able to give an account of the public moral experience that is the public consensus. The consensus itself is simply the tradition of reason as emergent in developing form in the special circumstances of American political-economic life.¹⁰¹

Thus stated, Murray’s basic argument for the epistemological overlap between Catholic doctrine of natural law and the American Consensus is that they share a certain realist epistemology. Or, more precisely stated, Murray argues that the doctrine of natural law describes certain truths about human reason in comparatively general terms, and that the American Consensus is one particular manifestation of this universal phenomenon/reality which the Catholic doctrine of natural law describes. As Murray puts the point: “The present point is that St. Thomas did construct with firmness and delicacy a system of moral thought that renders a remarkable

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 109-110. Murray does not think that every and any moral theory offers these advantages or can perform these functions, as he makes clear in Chapter 12 of *WHITT*, “The Doctrine is Dead: The Problem of the Moral Vacuum.” In it, Murray engages the claim that moral theory ought to have no bearing on foreign policy. He argues that this conclusion reveals the assumption of one of two “problematic” (and at times he suggests Protestant) conceptions of morality, which, in fact, ought not to have anything to do with government because they are moral theories that fail to adequately capture the nature of human beings, and therefore appreciate the dynamics of the “institutionalization of human action.” The first conception is “older” and Murray argues that it is voluntarist, fundamentalist, subjectivist, individualistic, and simplistic. The “newer” conception tends to be situationist, pragmatic, ambiguous, and pessimistic about human nature. For his part, Murray does believe that the American government’s foreign policy should be guided and assessed by moral standards, and that natural law morality is best suited to provide a framework or doing so. He argues that this is the case because natural law morality avoids the three “pseudo-problems” inherent in these inadequate conceptions of morality: 1) the divide between individual and collective morality, 2) the assumption of the normativity of self-interest, 3) skepticism about the possibility of a moral use of power. Murray is confident that the “tradition of reason” applied to U.S. foreign policy encounters none of these problems.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 110.

account of the origins and structure of the public consensus that today we have been told governs the industrial society and imparts to the processes and results of its economic action some quality of morality and humanity.”¹⁰² Murray defends this “proposition” by using two passages from Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* in which Aquinas discusses the natural law in order to offer at least four insights about the American consensus.

The first insight that Murray argues Thomas’s natural law theory offers regards the contents of the American Consensus. Murray suggests that Thomas helps us to see that the American Consensus is not ultimately a list or catalogue of immediate precepts of natural law that can, in Thomas’s words, “immediately, on some slight reflection, be accepted as good or repudiated as evil on grounds of the common and first principles.”¹⁰³ Rather, his theory suggests that the consensus pertains to the “remote precepts of natural law,” which bear on situations that are “historical.” Murray suggests that such situations contrast from “original” human situations, such as stealing, adultery, or spousal relations, which are more or less immediately and intuitively understood, because they “require a process of historical development.”¹⁰⁴ (For example, he maintains that the historical development of the “situation that relates corporation stockholders to corporation management is more remote from the springs of nature than the situation that relates husband and wife.”¹⁰⁵) Furthermore, it is on this point that Murray suggests that Thomas’s distinction provides us insight about the American consensus. Murray argues that Thomas helps us to see that, because the American political tradition emerged in the concrete, historical situation of the American collective life, in response to a particular set of challenges, it regards the “remote precepts of natural law” that must be investigated, formulated, and

¹⁰² Ibid., 118.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 115.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 118.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

elaborated after much reflection by a group of people with the necessary learning, technical expertise, and experience. Thomas thus enables us to appreciate the need for this group of experts to apply the more immediate principles of natural law to these complicated, historical, and contingent realities.

This brings us directly to the second insight which Thomas's theory offers us vis-à-vis the American Consensus. It pertains to the elaboration of the consensus and how it comes to exist in the people's collective self-understanding. Thomas's theory helps us to see that the elaboration of the Consensus is, even in a democracy, not the work of "the people at large," but rather, a task for the "wise and honest:"

The second point concerns the elaboration of the consensus. This is not the work of the people at large. It is not the job for sheer common sense. The public consensus is not formally public opinion. Its elaboration is the task of the wise and honest. The "careful inquiries," the "rather subtle reflection," the analysis of the "circumstances," the exact formulation of the "precept"—these tasks lie beyond the competence of the generality. It is for the wise, who develop the consensus, to give "instruction" to the generality, in the meaning of its principles as "matters of necessary observance," and also in the manner of their application. Public opinion, thus instructed by the wise, conspires to effect these applications. Thus the consensus exists in the public mind; but it exists in two forms or on two levels. In the form of simple affirmation or accepted conviction it exists among the people.¹⁰⁶

Here Murray suggests that Thomas's theory of the natural law helps us to see that the people who are able to elaborate the consensus and carry out such investigations satisfactorily must have a certain education, technical expertise, and integrity. Thomas's theory thus suggests that the truths of the American Consensus, as self-evident as they are, nevertheless in need of "elaboration" by those who can engage in the inquiry and analysis necessary to ensure that it is in accord with reason.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 119.

This observation leads us to the third insight that natural law theory offers about the American Consensus, which its “inherent authority.” Murray argues that Thomas helps us to see that:

This quality of being in accord with reason is the non-contingent element in the body of thought that constitutes the [American] consensus. Brute fact or sheer experience have no virtue to elaborate themselves into controlling rules of public conduct. The transcendence of experience and the transformation of fact into principle is the work of reason. The act whereby the doctrine of the consensus is formulated is not the act of inquiry into the facts, nor the act of reflection on the experience. It is an act of judgment, an exercise in moral affirmation or denial.¹⁰⁷

In this way, Murray uses Thomas’s theory to help us make sense of the American Consensus containing, in however parochial and political a form, universally valid truths. Furthermore, it helps us understand the consensus as the result of certain wise and honest people reflecting on experience and using judgment to determine political principles that accord with reason and therefore are inherently authoritative (presumably Murray has in mind the Founders here, at least). Thomas’s theory provides us greater insight into precisely what the Founders meant by “self-evident,” and why those self-evident truths might be universal and authoritative.

The fourth insight regards the “architects or artisans” of the public consensus. Murray reads Thomas as suggesting that it is the University’s job, and specifically not the Church’s role, to define and guard the public consensus. As Murray warns:

It is not the function of the Church as such to elaborate the public consensus, which is a body of rational knowledge, a structure of rational imperatives, that sustain and direct the action of the People Temporal and of their secular ruler. The proper task of the Church is the custody and development of the deposit of faith, which is a body of revealed truth, a structure of mystery, that sustains and directs the action of the People Spiritual. The public consensus is the property of the *studium*. This is the institution that, together with the Church, stood between the People and the Princes, the men of power, who bore the responsibility of using their power in the high service of justice and freedom of the people. It is the function of the University, which has a care for both the princes and for the people, to see that this duty is wisely performed, chiefly defining what justice is, and what the freedom of the people requires, in changing circumstances. The university

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

assembles these definitions and requirements into the public consensus, whereby the prince's use of his power in respect of the people may be judged, directed, and corrected. The *sapientis* of whom St. Thomas speaks made their residence in the University, not in the Curia.¹⁰⁸

Thus, Murray suggests that Thomas helps us to see both that the American Consensus relies on certain institutions to care for it, guard it, hone it, and disseminate it, and that these institutions ought not to be primarily religious institutions. Murray suggests that Thomas's theory of natural law helps us to appreciate the fact that such a "body of rational knowledge,"—the self-evident truths the Founders wrote about—is nevertheless always beholden to their embodiment in institutions and practices, transmission to future generations, and application to new situations and problems. Furthermore, he also suggests that universities have played a crucial role in the development and transmission of this body of knowledge.

In these four ways, Murray uses Thomas's discussion of the natural law to help him make his epistemological argument about the American Consensus. He uses Thomas to help us see that the American Consensus consists in a set of inherently authoritative political principles which are not immediately knowable but have been discerned from immediately knowable truths by the judgment of wise, honest, and properly educated individuals using reason to reflect on experience. Furthermore, it helps us to see that these principles are embodied in, guarded, developed, and transmitted by important social and educational institutions—specifically, universities. In doing so, Murray provides an overlapping interpretation of the American Consensus in decidedly Thomistic terms in order to highlight and make plain the relevant meanings *shared* by all Americans, and to elaborate some of their important implications in more detailed, if religious, terms.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

Before concluding, I would like to raise one more point about the consciousness Murray hopes to raise by offering these two arguments. It touches on Murray's epistemological argument but is crucially relevant to Murray's overall understanding of what it means to be conscious of the inheritance of the natural law and the American Consensus—what it means to “hold these truths.” Namely: the consciousness is an awareness of something that is “at bottom empirical.” While the points raised above about the American Consensus natural law tend toward abstract and universal philosophical formulation, Murray is explicit that he understands all of the above to be grounded first and foremost in empirical reality. Particularly relevant for the current analysis is Murray's discussion of a person protesting injustice, which he uses to illustrate this point. And because it is a crucial and often overlooked point, it is worth quoting Murray's discussion of the protestor at length. Murray cautions that:

This [the metaphysical premises of the natural law] sounds frightfully abstract; but it is simply the elaboration by the reflective intelligence of a set of data that are at bottom empirical. Consider, for instance, the contents of the consciousness of a man who is protesting against injustice, let us say, in a case where his own interests are not touched and where the injustice is wrought by technically correct legislation. The contents of his consciously protesting mind would be something like these. He is asserting that there is an idea of justice; that this idea is transcendent to the actually expressed will of the legislator; that it is rooted somehow in the nature of things; that he really *knows* this idea; that it is not made by his judgment but is the measure of his judgment; that this idea is the kind that ought to be realized in law and action; that its violation is injury, which his mind rejects as unreason; that this unreason is an offense not only against his own intelligence but against God, Who commands justice and forbids injustice.

Actually, this man, who may be no philosopher, is thinking in the categories of natural law and in the sequence of ideas that the natural-law mentality (which is the human mentality) follows. He has an objective idea of the “just” in contrast to the “legal.” His theoretical reason perceives the idea as true; his practical reason accepts the truth as good, therefore as law; his will acknowledges the law as normative of action. Moreover, this man will doubtless seek to ally others in his protest, in the conviction that they will think the same as he does. In other words, this man, whether he be protesting the Taft-Hartley Act or the Nazi genocidal laws, is making in his own way all the metaphysical affirmations that undergird the concept of natural law. In this matter philosophical reflection does not augment the data of commonsense. It merely analyzes,

penetrates, and organizes them in their full abstractness; this does not, however, remove them from vital contact with their primitive source in experience.¹⁰⁹

In this passage, Murray makes it clear that philosophical, metaphysical, and theoretical reflection helps to make sense of data that are fundamentally based in empirical reality, in the stuff of human experience. Thus, it becomes clear that Murray understands it to be possible for the overlapping “truths” of the natural law and the American Consensus to be taught and learned in many ways: theoretically, practically, as embedded in institutions, as present in the culture. However, it also becomes clear that, in all cases, this learning and teaching functions to organize the empirical data of real, human experience.

The Overlap: A Humanistic Axiology

As identifying these two strategies makes plain, Murray draws on multiple semiotic traditions, both religious and political, in his social criticism. Furthermore, he uses them simultaneously, freely intermixing their symbols as he sees fit, using each to help interpret and elaborate the other. Once one observes that Murray uses these two strategies for substantiating his claim that the American Consensus recognizes key truths that Catholics most often discuss under the rubric of natural law, it becomes clear that Murray is offering overlapping interpretations that draw consistently on the overlapping meanings of political and religious symbols, in order to both name the Eclipse of the American Consensus by the forces of modernity and provide a vision of a better alternative. Yet, what more can be said about this overlap itself? What’s the content that Murray’s overlapping interpretations reference?

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 294-295.

I argue that the overall thrust of Murray's analysis suggests that he understands the American Consensus and the Catholic tradition to overlap on a *humanistic axiology*. The overlap Murray identifies is between American democracy's political ethic of belief, and the ethic of belief presupposed by the Catholic tradition of natural law: both require their members to believe in the value of human beings. The term that best encapsulates this axiology is one that Murray often uses elsewhere, though rather sparingly in the pages of *WHTT*: human dignity. Despite this choice of language, the point permeates the pages of *WHTT*. Murray clearly states that the key content of the American Consensus that overlaps with the natural law tradition is, in fact, the sacredness and dignity of human beings. He writes that:

The argument here should be made to include the notion that the whole consensus has its ultimate root in the idea of the sacredness of man, *res sacra homo*. Man has a sacredness of personal dignity which commands the respect of society in all its laws and institutions. His sacredness guarantees him certain immunities and it also endows him with certain empowerments. He may make certain demands upon society and the state which require action in their support, and he may also utter certain prohibitions in the face of society and state. He may validly claim assistance, and with equal validity he may claim to be left alone.¹¹⁰

This idea of the sacredness of human persons, and their concomitant dignity, is precisely the idea that Murray argues in *WHTT* is historically, genealogical, and epistemologically endorsed by both the American political tradition and the tradition of natural law. The unifying thread connecting the English customs and institutions that bequeathed natural law ideas to the Founders, the culture of the colonial America in which natural rights philosophy was popular and American democracy conceived, the Lockean act of protest against unjust rule, the epistemology of the American Consensus, and the Thomistic understanding of natural law is precisely this humanistic axiology, which envisions human beings as dignified creatures, bearing certain inalienable rights on the basis of their natures, which governments must respect. In these ways,

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

then, Murray works to show us through his overlapping arguments that this humanistic axiology is not only the inheritance or special province of American Catholics, but belongs historically, genealogically, and epistemologically, to *all* Americans.

It is worth noting at this juncture how Murray's two strands of argument, as well as the humanistic axiology which they identify, work to overcome the Eclipse of the American Consensus by the forces of modernity discussed above. Recall that Murray thinks the Eclipse can be overcome only by raising Americans' collective consciousness about the American Consensus, which will facilitate the kind of "public argument" that defines a truly political association. Murray's overlapping interpretations contribute to this task by identifying a certain American collective self-understanding that is—whether it was dominant in the mid-century United States or not—hospitable to pluralism and stands to render the totalizing political and spiritual monisms with which Murray is concerned unattractive and unnecessary. Murray's interpretation of the American Consensus does so in three ways.

First, Murray's overlapping interpretations evince an understanding of the American Consensus as something that concerns only human, universal, and natural truths that are in principle accessible to all people, regardless of religious affiliation or lack thereof and will therefore resonate with everyone's experience at one point or another. Moreover, Murray's appeal to Thomas Aquinas and the Catholic tradition of natural law demonstrates and performs the very hospitableness of the American Consensus to articulations of these human, universal, and natural truths as they happen to be historically conceived and articulated in the native, first-order terms of a particular religious tradition. In doing so, Murray's overlapping interpretations suggests that Americans can and should embrace the American Consensus with the confidence that it contains genuinely universal truths that *will* in fact resonate with similar truths embraced

by their own comprehensive religious traditions, and thus, also be “native” to them. His overlapping interpretations help us see that the American Consensus is hospitable to religious pluralism because they help to make plain that the American Consensus concerns only those truths that are bound to overlap across diverse traditions.

Second, Murray’s overlapping interpretations draws our attention to the ways in which the American Consensus functions as a shared language which can facilitate the dialogue/public argument he sees as being necessary to overcoming the Eclipse. Murray himself is clear that the American Consensus “furnishes the basis of communication between government and the people and among the people themselves. It furnishes a common universe of discourse in which public issues can be intelligibly stated and intelligently argued.”¹¹¹ As such a “common universe of discourse,” the American Consensus enables diverse Americans to appeal to shared terms and a shared frame of reference in their efforts to discuss matters of public concern and hammer out solutions to common problems. And Murray appeals to it, at least in part, in order to contribute to such a conversation/dialogue in terms which are also those of his compatriots.

Third, by appealing to such a common universe of discourse, Murray’s overlapping interpretations work to alleviate the Eclipse by limiting the intellectual confusion that comes with the experiences of religious pluralism. By appealing to such a language/discourse that is both epistemology and historically common to Americans writ large, Murray suggests an alternative pathway to the intellectual confusion that discussing public matters in a religiously diverse context perennially threatens. He suggests that using the language of the American Consensus to frame, discuss, and debate matters of public concern will facilitate a “dialogue” or

¹¹¹ Ibid., 88.

“public argument” in such a way that will reduce such intellectual confusion and experiences of radical alterity.

In doing so, Murray suggests, it will also reduce the necessity and/or appeal of resorting to any of the potentially attractive monisms—each of which finally resorts to force and sheer power politics in order to manage the diversity in society—by providing a more civil and conversational alternative. Indeed, Murray remains optimistic that the kind of religious pluralism that confuses Americans’ collective intelligence can be replaced with a somewhat more ordered and less confusing religious pluralism that is based in the truths of the American consensus. In this way, he hopes that the American Consensus will provide the Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Secularists of his day a tradition and a language that threads the needle between pluralism and monism: *E pluribus unum*. He suggests the American Consensus will provide this measure of unity that is not finally monistic because it is open to various (religious) interpretations.

Conclusion

At this point one begins to see how Murray’s social criticism as well as the humanistic axiology that it names and to which it appeals mediates between political norms and religious norms. Furthermore, observing the details of this overlap enables one to draw three conclusions about its implication for democratic theory. First, the example of Murray makes clear that the overlap in question is on normative matters—the value of human beings. Second, the above analysis suggests that Murray’s overlapping interpretations routinely engage democracy’s psychological and doxastic dimensions. I have shown how Murray’s statements suggest that he understood the invocation of and defense of a particular community’s set of foundational political beliefs—the American Consensus—to be a key strategy to overcome the threats posed

to American society by the various forces of modernity. Furthermore, I have shown that Murray's analysis suggests the crucial way that these beliefs must be actively "held" in the public's consciousness, a state which he suggests can be facilitated by "dialogue" and "public argument." Third, Murray's statements make clear that the overlap is dialogic and hermeneutic in nature: it emerges only in and through his interpretation. Murray's statements suggests that neither the American Consensus nor the Catholic tradition of natural law are entirely self-interpreting, but rather, that they both sometimes requires elaboration in other terms.

Murray's overlapping interpretations constitute evidence that religious social critics can and often do work semiotically and hermeneutically to mediate between the normative dimensions of religion and politics in American society. Religious social critics like Murray identify and utilize both political and religious symbols which appeal to the social meanings that are shared among their audience and in doing so bring those shared meanings to bear on the society that they critique. In the case of Murray, this involves repeated reflection on and interpretation—in overlapping terms—of the meaning the American Consensus.

Thus, Murray provides us our first example of a religious social critic who finds himself, like all other Americans, equally required to believe certain things by the tradition of American democracy. It is in response to this belief-requirement that we see Murray reconciling those beliefs with his broader religious worldview. Furthermore, it is clear that Murray feels himself free to make sense of the beliefs American democracy has traditionally required in the terms which he finds most meaningful. Focusing on these features of Murray's religious social criticism, we further observe the ways that the American democracy's humanistic axiology and political ethic of belief help order society to the ideals of liberty and equality amidst the reality of religious diversity, and that they do so dialogically and hermeneutically.

4. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Christian Personalism, Human Dignity and the “Meaning of Our Creed”

So I say to you, my friends, that even though we must face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out *the true meaning of its creed*—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.

Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have A Dream”

Deeply rooted in our political and religious heritage is the conviction that every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth.

Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Ethical Demands for Integration”

Introduction

In his most famous speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. describes his dream for an integrated United States of America as “deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”¹ When he does, the crowd bursts into thunderous applause. As that final word echoes across the reflection pool, down the National Mall, to the US Capitol building, one is left with that final word ringing in one’s ears: equal, equal, equal.

At first glance, King does seem to be speaking about equality. To be sure, he is. In his speech, “I Have A Dream,” King cites the Founding Fathers’ assertion of equal creation and equal rights in order to indict the America of his time precisely for its gross inequality, specifically for Black Americans. He uses this assertion of equality as the standard by which to measure the decidedly unequal status quo as falling short, as the basis on which to demand equal rights, and as the justification for the changes he would like to see in American society.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 219.

But is King's invocation of the Declaration of Independence's assertion that "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" merely a statement about the place of equality in our political tradition? It bears dwelling on King's usage of the Declaration here, because there is, in fact, more to it than a simple appeal to a principle of equality.

These dynamics become clear as soon as one turns her attention to the way King himself chooses to characterize the Founders' words: King describes his dream for America as a dream that we will see the day when "this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed." In this way, he provides a clue that he is engaging in more than the citing a principle or invoking the major premise in a logical syllogism. Rather, his prophetic call for America to "live out the meaning of this creed" suggests that King is not only citing or invoking the Founders' statement but *interpreting* its meaning. He is interpreting the segregated American status-quo in terms of the ideals of America's democratic political tradition. In the course of doing so, he is explicating what he takes to be the practical meaning of those things which the Founders tell us that American democracy requires us to believe.

This observation already invites inquiry into Martin Luther King, Jr.'s understanding of American democracy's political ethic of belief, because it suggests that his statements provide evidence of its existence and his interpretations of its content. Additionally, King was and remains undoubtedly one of Americas greatest social prophets; he offers us a first-rate example of a Deweyan-Walzerian prophet of the Public.² What's more, King constitutes a prime example

² Interpretation of King as inheriting and continuing the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, nor is viewing him as such a prophet who intervenes on behalf of American society. Cathleen Kaveny uses the term "social prophet" to refer to figures who use religious language in the public sphere to make indictments of the status quo, including King in *Prophecy Without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016) 65. Cornel West often writes of his speech and activism under this rubric. See, for example, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2004); "Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization" in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Johnathan VanAntwerpen, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Albert J. Raboteau

of a specifically religious social prophet, and thus someone who interpreted the state of American society for his audiences in overlapping terms: both those of his Baptist and personalist brand of Christianity and those of the tradition and heritage of American democracy. As such, King works to make sense of American democracy's belief-requirements (or as he once famously referred to it, "its creed") in *both* religious and American-democratic terms and he specifically identifies the point of overlap as a shared understanding of dignity. For this reason, his writings and speeches offer a glimpse into a set of overlapping interpretations that provide evidence about the hermeneutic and dialogic relationship between Christianity's belief-dimensions as well as those of American democracy.

An Overlooked Overlap

King's diverse legacies as a theologian, philosopher, moral leader, and social activist are well recognized and documented. His philosophical and theological training in Boston, his upbringing in the Black church, his position as Pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, and his leading role in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference all feature prominently in literature whose focus is King's philosophical and theological commitments.³ Equally well documented are the religious, moral, and philosophical underpinnings of his method of choice for the social and political change for which he advocated: nonviolence.⁴ More recently, some

includes a chapter on King in his book, *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and their Struggle for Social and Political Justice*, (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press: 2016).

³ Rufus Burrow, Jr., *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Rufus Burrow, Jr., *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Theology of Resistance* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015); Garth Baker-Fletcher, *Somebodyness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Richard L. Deats, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Spirit-Led Prophet* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003); Frederick L. Downing, *To See the Promised Land: The Faith Pilgrimage of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986); Gary J. Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 255-281.

⁴ James P. Hanigan, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Foundations of Nonviolence* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984); Greg Moses, *Revolution of Conscience: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Philosophy of*

interpreters have placed special emphasis on King's role as a specifically radical social critic who sharply criticized and worked to change the racist, militarist, and capitalist status quo of the segregationist society of his time.⁵ Additionally, his legacy as a political philosopher/theorist is also an object of increasing academic interest.⁶ No matter the particular emphasis, King appears throughout as a staunch advocate for American democracy and, in particular, its ideals.

In this chapter, I will not focus on any one of these strands of thinking in particular. Rather, I will hold together these strands—theology, social criticism, and American democracy—to show that King's social criticism frequently and characteristically consists in precisely the kind of overlapping interpretations which are the object of this study. I will show that many of his statements consist in interpretations of the American social status quo simultaneously in terms of King's Christian personalism and the tradition of American democracy.

Two Approaches

Notation

Arguing that King's statements appeal to some kind of overlap between the political and the religious is not an entirely novel argument. In fact, many of King's interpreters note the overlap in their own analyses of his speaking, writing, and activism. However, none has, as yet,

Nonviolence (New York: Guliford Press, 1997); John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Nonviolent Strategies and Tactics for Social Change* (Lanham: Madison Books, 2000); John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr. The Making of a Mind* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1982); Michael J. Nojeim, *Gandhi and King: The Power of Nonviolent Resistance* (Westport, CT.: Praeger, 2004).

⁵ Cornel West, *The Radical King* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015); Jennifer J. Yanco, *Misremembering Dr. King: Revisiting the Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014).

⁶ Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry, *To Shape A New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018).

exclusively focused on the overlap itself, or drawn out its theoretical implications.⁷ Instead, scholars tend to acknowledge the overlap in passing, as part of biographical or historical accounts.

To illustrate this point, I will briefly consider two accounts that share my aim of treating King as a certain kind of political theorist, and that also deal intimately with material relevant to the subject at hand: Garth Baker-Fletcher's comprehensive account of King's theory of dignity and Danielle Allen's sustained analysis of King's essay, "The Ethical Demands for Integration."⁸ Each takes pains to trace the conceptual and theoretical dynamics of King's thought and does so in order to draw out its implications for current social ethics and/or political theory. Yet, each merely acknowledges the political-religious overlap in King's interpretations, without dwelling on its significance.

One observes such brief mention of this overlap in Danielle Allen's essay, "Integration, Freedom, and the Affirmation of Life," which provides a close reading of King's essay, "The Ethical Demands for Integration." In it, Allen argues that King offers a contribution to republican and democratic theory in the form of a theory of integration based on a conception of nonsacrificable, positive liberty.⁹ Her choice to focus on this essay of King's is particularly

⁷ John Rawls seems to think his theory of public reason does so. He is keenly aware of this overlap in his discussion of Martin Luther King, Jr., "public reason" and the "Proviso" in *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 249-54, 462-466. However, both Rawls's larger theory of "public reason" and his "Proviso" suggest that King somehow translated (or would have been able, in due course, to translate) his religious "comprehensive doctrine" into "general terms" that "fully support constitutional values and accord with public reason," instead of engaging in interpretations in religious *and* political terms that were both simultaneous and overlapping. See especially p. 250n39. This footnote is particularly illuminating because, in it, Rawls curiously misinterprets King's invocation of the language of Thomistic natural law and the language of "human personality" in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" as an articulation of his religious doctrine in "general terms," rather than a direct invocation of certain parts of that religious doctrine in first-order religious language that overlap with the more general statements about just and unjust laws that follow.

⁸ Danielle Allen, "Integration, Freedom, and the Affirmation of Life," in *To Shape A New World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018); Garth Baker-Fletcher, *Somebodyness: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theory of Dignity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁹ Allen, "Integration, Freedom, and the Affirmation of Life" in *To Shape A New World*, 146, 151-52.

significant to the current study, because I will argue below that King's "The Ethical Demands for Integration" is one of the most significant instances of the kind of overlapping interpretation with which I am concerned; it is certainly the clearest example I have found.¹⁰ Despite this fact, in Allen's interpretation and constructive appropriation of King's essay, the diverse and overlapping nature of the authorities to which King appeals, and the corresponding symbols that he invokes, merit one introductory paragraph. Allen writes of this overlap:

King's essay is characteristically subtle, blending the *theological* and the *philosophical*. He spells out a systematic theory of freedom, without ever quite saying so, through an argument about desegregation and integration. As he does, he makes both a *secular Kantian* and also a *theological* case for the justice of integration, for the necessary and nonsacrificable place of integration in freedom, and for the compatibility of this political theory with the demands of morality and religion.¹¹

Allen's recognition of King's "blending" goes some way to acknowledge the diverse mix of philosophical, religious, and political symbols and authorities which King invokes in the essay. However, Allen notes this blending and then never mentions it again. Nor does she discuss what she takes its implications to be for her topic: King's picture of integration and its theory of freedom.

Furthermore, Allen curiously identifies this "blending" as a mixing of "philosophical" and "theological" symbols yet excludes mention of the political symbols in King's essay. Such theological and philosophical blending certainly occurs in King's essay, most obviously in King's direct appeal to Kant's categorical imperative as well as his references to Martin Buber, and "the Hebraic-Christian" notion of creation in the image of God. However, I find it striking that Allen fails to note or discuss the American-democratic symbols which hold equal prominence of place in the very same section of the text, entitled "The Worth of Persons":

¹⁰ See the following section, "King's Overlapping Interpretations."

¹¹ Danielle Allen, "Integration, Freedom, and the Affirmation of Life," in *To Shape A New World*, 147, emphases added.

invocation of the Declaration of Independence and Frederick Douglass' lecture on the Constitution.¹² This oversight is striking for two reasons. First, because King explicitly states that the overlap between "our political and religious heritage" is the subject of this section of the essay.¹³ Second, because the subject of Allen's essay is specifically King's *political* philosophy.

To be sure, a sustained discussion of the overlap I explore in this chapter is well beyond the parameters of the task which Allen sets for herself in this short essay. Nevertheless, the kind of overlapping interpretations that King offers also strike me as carrying important implications for Allen's argument: namely, that King understands the ideal of integration in which his theory of freedom is situated to be ethically demanded by not only religious and philosophical traditions, but by our shared political tradition as well. In these ways, Allen's cursory treatment of these dynamics in her essay evinces both an awareness of the overlapping nature of King's interpretations and a failure to fully appreciate its place in his thought.

In the case of Garth Baker-Fletcher's account of King's theory of dignity, *Somebodyness*, Baker-Fletcher also identifies this overlap in the course of his analysis. It appears in both his exposition of King's "early concept of dignity" from 1955-1962 as well as his discussion of King's "later view of dignity" from 1962-1968. In the former, Baker-Fletcher singles out King's overlapping strategy in his simultaneous invocation of both political and religious symbols. Through exegesis of King's "Holt Street Address," Baker-Fletcher describes King's early "method of presentation" to be precisely one of overlapping interpretation:

The 'Holt Street Address' reveals King's early method for speaking of dignity. King's method had two fundamental moves in the social situation of oppression: first, appealing to the fundamental rights of American citizenship and second, appealing to the fundamental theological right for dignity.¹⁴

¹² King, "Ethical Demands for Integration" in *Testament of Hope*, 118.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Baker-Fletcher, *Somebodyness*, 31.

To substantiate this claim, Baker-Fletcher goes on to trace the ways King invokes both the language of American citizenship and American democracy, on the hand, and the language of Christianity and Christian symbols on the other and concludes that King’s “statements reveal the underlying thrust of King’s entire address, namely, that the people were protesting for *greater dignity*. They believed this greater dignity to be both their Constitutional right as American citizens and a concept embedded in their fundamental Christian beliefs.”¹⁵ In this short section, Baker-Fletcher recognizes King as a social critic engaging in overlapping interpretations of the status quo, identifies the relevant political and religious symbols which form that overlap, and specifies the content of the overlap itself: an overlapping belief in a certain conception of human dignity. In doing so, Baker-Fletcher identifies all the key elements of King’s overlapping interpretation of American democracy’s and Christianity’s normative and doxastic dimensions, and foreshadows my own analysis and conclusions in this chapter. Yet, because his aim is specifically to trace King’s notion of dignity over time, his exegesis and analysis of the “Holt Street Address” constitute a mere three pages of his exposition, and he fails to give it much further reflection. Like Allen, Baker-Fletcher demonstrates both an awareness of the overlapping nature of King’s interpretations and a lack of full appreciation for its implications.

The one other place where this overlap merits sustained attention is in Baker-Fletcher’s analysis of King’s “later view of dignity.” In this section, Baker-Fletcher again identifies an overlap in the symbols that King uses to characterize one of his key motifs: the American Dream. Baker-Fletcher makes clear that he understands the symbol of the Dream to represent what King calls the “American creed,” as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, for example.¹⁶ In his analysis of King’s use of the “Dream motif,” Baker-Fletcher describes the

¹⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶ Ibid., 148.

overlap between this “American creed” and King’s theological anthropology in terms of “parallel concepts.” From his analysis of King’s speech, “The American Dream,” he concludes that:

King’s American Dream bears a strong resemblance to his basic theological anthropology, especially in relationship to his doctrine of *imago dei*. The two are, in a sense, parallel concepts, both united in their valuation of the human person as inherently worthy and possessing dignity.¹⁷

In doing so, Baker-Fletcher again makes plain, however briefly, that King uses both religious and political symbols to bring to bear on American society the conception of dignity that Baker-Fletcher is tracing in his study. As he puts it: “King elaborated the American dream in a way that made it parallel to this theological anthropology: that all persons are children of God, that all life is interrelated, that freedom is an American right because it is a fundamental part of God’s image within each of us, and that nonviolent protest is the most creative, morally appropriate, and powerful way of insuring human dignity for the oppressed.”¹⁸

It is precisely because this overlap is both suggested and overlooked in such treatments of King’s political, social, and theological ethics that it bears further analysis. Both thinkers successfully identify the fact that King appeals to both American-democratic norms *and* to Christian norms in order to make a case for why Black Americans must be viewed and treated as *somebody*, as bearers of dignity. Yet, neither dwells on the mechanics of this overlap, nor reflects on its theoretical implications for their own work or for democratic theory.

Interpretation

Yet, grasping this overlap could not be more important for democratic theory, and in particular for its ability to theorize the relationship between religion and democracy. Examining King’s overlapping interpretations enables one not only to note the existence of such overlap but

¹⁷ Ibid., 151. See also Baker-Fletcher’s statement on p. 162.

¹⁸ Ibid., 162.

to identify its dynamics. As I have been suggesting throughout, these dynamics have significant implications for conceptualizing the relationship between religion and politics in the United States. Once one observes them in detail, three highly significant implications for democratic theory become clear. First, the overlap is on normative matters. As I will show below, King's statements provide evidence that it is precisely in their normative dimensions that King's Christian Personalism and his commitment to American democracy overlap. Second, the overlap engages democracy's psychological and doxastic dimensions. King's statements suggest that he understood the invocation of specifically political beliefs—America's "creed"—as a key strategy to overcome the eclipse of democratic consciousness by the myth of racial inferiority. He is engaged in an appeal to things that Americans simply must take to be *true*. Third, the overlap is dialogic and hermeneutic in nature: it emerges only through interpretation. King's statements also suggest that America's "creed" is not self-interpreting, but rather requires elaboration in other terms, in this case often (though not exclusively) Christian-Personalist ones. Because each of these points helps us to grasp the doxastic, dialogic, and hermeneutic dimensions of the relationship between religion and American democracy, these observations thus helps us to see the ways that American democracy's humanistic axiology and corresponding political ethic of belief function to facilitate equality and liberty amidst conditions of diversity by making possible a set of shared meanings which diverse Americans, such as King, can make sense of in diverse terms.

In the sections that follow, I will focus on select instances of overlapping interpretations in King's speaking and writing. King and his ghost writers recycled many ideas, tropes, themes and even the entirety of some of his speeches and writings, sometimes over the course of many

years.¹⁹ This makes the task of cataloging every last overlapping interpretation both difficult and unnecessary. In order to most sharply clarify the point at hand, I have chosen to focus on several of what I take to be the clearest, most representative, and therefore most illuminating instances of such overlapping interpretation and provide a close reading of these passages: first focusing on King's use of democratic symbols, then his use of religious symbols, and finally their overlap.

In doing so, I advance the argument that King simultaneously appeals to Christian-Personalist symbols and American-democratic symbols in order to interpret the meaning of the beliefs required by both Christianity and American democracy in a way that aims to raise consciousness among both white and Black Americans about the human worth of Black Americans and that this consciousness-raising involves the demand to change certain (racist) beliefs, to view Black Americans as *somebody*. Along the way, I will demonstrate how the example of King's religious social criticism meets the four hermeneutical criteria I outlined in Chapter 2: King's overlapping interpretations 1) respond to an Eclipse of the Public by the myth of racial inferiority, 2) demonstrate that King understands both American democracy and Christianity to each involve an ethic of belief, 3) provide evidence that he understands these ethics of belief to overlap on a certain humanistic axiology, which he refers to with the term "dignity," and thereby 4) make plain the hermeneutic and dialogic mediating function of both religious social critics and this humanistic axiology in a religiously plural, democratic society.

King's Consciousness-Raising Social Criticism

Before I get into the details of King's overlapping interpretations, it bears addressing at greater length the reasons that King is a good fit for this study of democracy's psychological and

¹⁹ King's speech "The American Dream" is a prime example of such recycling and adaptation.

doxastic dimensions as well as the broader context of his social criticism in which his overlapping interpretations are situated. King is an excellent fit for this study not only because he explicitly invokes the beliefs required by American democracy, but because he does so in the form of social criticism articulated in the context of a social movement for racial justice that he understands as importantly a consciousness-raising effort. To put it in terms of Dewey's psychological theory of democracy discussed in Chapter 1, King can be understood as responding to a Deweyan Eclipse of the Public by the myth of racial inferiority.²⁰ King's emphasis on the deleterious psychological effects of racism and Jim Crow segregation as well as his insistence on the power of nonviolence to combat these harmful psychological effects and cultivate in black and White Americans a new consciousness based in the dignity of the person are consistent themes across his writings and speeches. His interpretation in *Why We Can't Wait* of the Negro Revolution of 1963 evinces a particularly strong awareness of both the consciousness-impeding nature of racism and the consciousness-raising effect of nonviolent response to it. For this reason, a brief examination of his statements in that work proves instructive on this point.

First, King depicts the myth of racial inferiority as an importantly psychological problem, a force that has impeded and obstructed the American's collective *consciousness*.

King argues the "doctrine of race inferiority" threatens Americans as well as American democracy precisely by corrupting Americans' consciousness(es):

It was upon this massive base of racism [European colonialism and the genocide of Native Americans] that the prejudice toward the nonwhite was readily built, and found rapid growth. This long-standing racist ideology has corrupted and diminished our democratic ideals. It is the tangled web of prejudice from which many Americans now

²⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: New American Library, 2000). In *Why We Can't Wait*, King does not use this exact terminology, though his own descriptions suggest this term. He writes of a "doctrine of race inferiority" which he characterizes as a "myth of inferiority" which is a "myth that one race is inferior to another," 110-11.

seek to liberate themselves, without realizing how deeply it has been *woven into their* consciousness.²¹

By connecting racist beliefs to both Americans' consciousness(es) as well as their democratic ideals, King addresses the effects of racism vis-à-vis the psychological and doxastic dimensions American democracy: he suggests that racism has affected our consciousness(es) in ways that diminish the influence of democracy's ideals on them.

At this point, one observes the ways that Dewey's theory helps to make plain the dynamics at play in King's statements about consciousness and American democracy. One might say that, for King, such a "corrupted" consciousness cannot adequately reflect upon and interpret what Dewey calls the "consequences of combined action," because the myth of racial inferiority has led to a false consciousness that, as King clarifies, has "diminished our democratic ideals." King's analysis suggests that many (specifically white) Americans cannot apprehend the relevant Public because they cannot and do not apprehend the consequences of combined action on all those affected (specifically Black Americans). Many (white) Americans are not conscious of the relevant Public and their place in it, even if they perceive themselves to be conscious of these things. In fact, one of King's overarching claims in *Why We Can't Wait* is that the civil rights movement and its method of nonviolent direct action helped combat the myth of racial inferiority because it was able to disrupt this false, corrupted, or anti-democratic consciousness. This is why King writes approvingly of the way that the Negro Revolution of 1963 "penetrated the consciousness of white America" such that white America paid attention to the now iconic March on Washington later that year.²²

²¹ Ibid., 109-10.

²² Ibid., 114.

Additionally, King repeatedly calls across many speeches and writings for his audiences to be psychologically “maladjusted” to the elements of such a false consciousness, providing further evidence of King’s understanding that America’s “democratic ideals” entail a certain kind of consciousness. For example, King writes that:

Modern psychology has a word that is probably used more than any other word. It is the word “maladjusted.” Now we should all seek to live a well adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. But there are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism. I call on you to be maladjusted to such things.²³

In such calls for psychological maladjustment to many elements of the pervasive racism of Jim Crow America, one observes in a different idiom King’s understanding that the myth of racial inferiority constitutes a psychological problem, a problem whose solution will also involve important psychological dynamics—maladjustment.²⁴

Second, King’s interpretation of the Negro Revolution of 1963 suggests that the power of the “drama” of nonviolent direct action to help overcome this Eclipse is directly connected to its semiotic and communicative ability to affect this maladjustment—to raise people’s consciousness, both individually and collectively. King’s discussion of nonviolent direct action suggests that it both dramatizes the consequences of combined action (in this case: exclusion) and encourages reflection those consequences. In doing so, it helps to overcome the Eclipse of the Public and nurtures the kind of consciousness that Dewey maintains defines the idea of democracy itself.

²³ King, “The Power of Nonviolence” in *Testament of Hope*, 14-15. See similar statements in “The Current Crisis in Race Relations” pp. 89-90 and “The American Dream” p. 216.

²⁴ I will discuss at length below how King’s repeated call for such psychological “maladjustment” relates to his overlapping interpretations.

King himself suggests that such consciousness-raising occurred at the level of the individual meaning of social inclusion, though in different ways for Black Americans and White Americans. Regarding its effects on Black Americans, King makes a signature argument: that the black American found a new sense of “somebodiness”—a sense of dignity and self-esteem—through in and through her participation in the revolution and its method of nonviolence.²⁵ As King reminds the reader : “The full dimensions of victory can be found only by comprehending the change within the minds of millions of Negroes...The Negro became, in his own estimation, the *equal* of any man.”²⁶ He suggests that, in its defense of the black American’s rights and dignity, the revolution and its method of nonviolence worked to free the black American’s consciousness from the “psychological slavery” of internalized racism.

Regarding its effects on White Americans, King suggests that it dramatically woke them to the racist (and perhaps previously difficult to perceive) consequences of the collective action of their own dominant caste. In dramatizing the effects of black American’s exclusion from American society, it helped White Americans to realize that “segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality” and “gives the segregator a false sense of superiority.”²⁷ King suggests that, by doing so, it helped begin the “psychological adjustment [that] will save white people from going into the new age with old vestiges of prejudice and attitudes of white supremacy.”²⁸ For both groups, perhaps for the first time, it represents—to borrow Dewey’s turn of phrase—a truly “shared experience.”

In fact, King’s interpretation also suggests that this consciousness-raising occurred at the communal level. By communicating the meaning and stakes of both actual exclusion and

²⁵ King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 16, 75.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁷ King, “The American Dream” in *Testament of Hope*, 215.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

potential inclusion, the nonviolent direct action of the “Negro Revolution” of 1963 represents a semiotic form of action that works to make an eclipsed Public explicit. King, of course, does not use the Deweyan term, “Public,” to refer to the entity which is at stake in and constituted through reflection on the consequences of combined action. When speaking about what is at stake, King writes of “brotherhood,” “interrelatedness,” and an “inescapable network of mutuality.”²⁹

Against his critics who deny the empirical reality of such a Public united by conjoint action and write of him and the movement as “outside agitators,” King asserts the fundamental, inescapable relatedness of all who live in the United States. He suggests that all Americans, black and white, are equal members of and are accountable to the collective, empirical reality of something like a Deweyan “Public”:

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly... Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider within its bounds.³⁰

Here, King is directly occupied with those “combined consequences of actions” as Dewey puts it, consequences that extend beyond those immediately concerned. The assertion that “whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly,” is precisely the insight at the core of Dewey’s understanding of the Public and at the basis of his arguments for the democratic importance of being conscious of the Public to which one belongs. Furthermore, both King and Dewey are

²⁹ Such references are both common and consistent throughout King’s writings and are a part of his broader vision of the beloved community. It is worth noting that he uses these phrases at times in a political sense, at other times in a metaphysical sense, at yet other times in a religious sense, and sometimes he references multiple of senses simultaneously. This further speaks to the multiple traditions and rich heritages in which and with which King is working, as well as to the fact that King’s understanding of many of the terms he used was multi-dimensional and intersectional. Specific instances in *Why We Can’t Wait* include: Brotherhood, pp. 68, 74, 83, 84, 142; Interrelatedness, pp. 65, 142; Inescapable network of mutuality, p. 65.

³⁰ King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 65. Here King emphasizes what I have called the political sense of this “interrelatedness.”

concerned with the ways that a consciousness of such the interrelatedness of the extant Public makes collective self-rule possible, and in particular, collective action in light of that consciousness. In an important way, Both King's and Dewey's emphasis on consciousness stresses the importance of making the empirical, collective reality of the Public of which we find ourselves a part, a psychological reality, so that we all can and will act in light of it.

Indeed, King argues that a major effect of the struggle for civil-rights is precisely increased consciousness of this interrelatedness:

One aspect of the civil-rights struggle that receives little attention is the contribution it makes to the whole society. The Negro in winning rights for himself produces substantial benefits for the nation...Eventually the civil-rights movement will have contributed infinitely more to the nation than the eradication of racial injustice. It will have enlarged the concept of brotherhood to a vision of total interrelatedness.³¹

King suggests that nonviolent direct action leads to a greater consciousness of the interrelatedness of all those implicated in the consequences of combined action, or a greater consciousness of what Dewey calls a "Public." In this way, nonviolent direct action is not only individually consciousness-raising, but collectively consciousness-raising as well. Again, on Dewey's theory of democracy, this consciousness-raising is importantly democratizing.

Thus, King suggests that the Negro Revolution of 1963 contributed to increased awareness of both the value and the interrelatedness of all Americans, of the American Public, and in doing so helped to overcome the Eclipse of that Public by the myth of racial inferiority. By engaging in nonviolent direct action, the Negro Revolution of 1963 made recourse to semiotic communication in order to communicate and affect a scathing critique of the ways the myth of racial inferiority works to dehumanize and exclude Black Americans from full and equal standing in American politics and society, of the ways it psychologically distorts White

³¹ Ibid., 124.

Americans' perceptions of themselves and others, and in doing so, of the ways it prevents all Americans from becoming conscious of the relevant collective of which they are a part and thus their ability to act in light of this membership.

Yet, what were the signs and symbols that King used to affect such consciousness-raising communication? Recall Dewey's semiotics of social inquiry, which suggests the key role of artists fully and meaningfully communicating the social meaning of the results of social scientists' inquiry. Also recall that I have argued that religious social critics also engage in such meaningful communication of the social meaning of the consequences of combined action. So it bears considering exactly what signs and symbols King characteristically invokes in his effort to overcome this Eclipse of the Public by the myth of racial inferiority. What symbols does he use to make these meanings plain? How does he raise consciousness in this way?

King's Overlapping Interpretations

King uses *both* political and religious symbols to raise consciousness. For this reason, it bears considering both the political and religious symbols he uses as well as their relation. While presenting a schematic or comprehensive overview of the King's political and religious symbolism may appear to be an attractive option, in King's case, this approach risks obscuring the very juxtapositions and overlapping meanings which I aim to make plain. Therefore, in the remaining sections, I will focus on a select few of King's exemplary overlapping interpretations in order to trace some of his key political and religious symbols and also the ways he juxtaposes these symbols in an overlapping manner. Though there are many more instances of such overlapping interpretations in King's speeches and writings, I will focus on King's overlapping interpretations as they appear in various versions of his call for psychological "maladjustment,"

in a commencement address he gave at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1961 entitled “The American Dream,” and an essay entitled “The Ethical Demands for Integration,” which King presented at a 1962 church conference in Nashville, Tennessee.

Democratic Symbols: King’s Use of America’s ‘creed’

In each of these instances, one notices immediately the American-democratic symbolism that King invokes. Indeed, across his writings, King has a number of American democratic symbols which he invokes with quite some regularity. His favorite choices include those which appear in the following examples: Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, the American dream, the United States Constitution and, most of all, the language and symbolism of Declaration of Independence. As will become clear below, King uses these symbols to invoke what he takes to be some core beliefs required by the American-democratic political tradition and interprets American society in their light.

In the first instance, King appeals to Lincoln, Jefferson, and the Declaration of Independence in his calls for psychological “maladjustment” to segregation and discrimination. The below version of his discussion of “maladjustment” comes from his 1957 speech, “The Power of Nonviolence.”³² He writes:

Modern psychology has a word that is probably used more than any other word. It is the word “maladjusted.” Now we should all seek to live a well adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. But there are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism. I call on you to be maladjusted to such things. I call upon you to be as...*maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln* who had the vision to see that this nation could not exist half slave and half free. *As maladjusted as Jefferson* who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery could cry out, “All

³² Abridged variations of the same text appear in “The Current Crisis in Race Relations” and “The American Dream”.

men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty and happiness.”³³

Here King draws parallels between his refusal to psychologically adjust to the reality of segregation, Lincoln’s refusal to “adjust” to the notion that the American nation could or should be divided, as well as Jefferson’s refusal to fully “adjust” to the notion that some humans were inherently worth less than others.³⁴ In doing so, King invokes specifically American-democratic symbols—Lincoln, Jefferson, and the text of the Declaration—to make plain the threats posed to the consciousness of the individual American by Jim Crow segregation. He uses these symbols to interpret the American social status-quo in light of that more perfect union envisioned by key figures in the American-democratic political tradition.

In the second instance, King also invokes the symbolism of the Founding Fathers and the Declaration of Independence, in this instance connecting it to the symbol of “the American dream.” While King gave multiple speeches and sermons by this name throughout the early 1960s, all contain slight variations of the following passage, which as quoted comes from his 1961 commencement address at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. In his advice to the graduates, he characterizes the American dream as follows:

As you go out today to enter the clamorous highways of life, I should like to discuss with you some aspects of the American dream. For in a real sense, America is essentially a dream, a dream as yet unfulfilled. It is a dream of a land where men of all races, of all nationalities and of all creeds can life together as brothers. *The substance of the dream is expressed in these sublime words, words lifted to cosmic proportions: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This is the dream.*

One of the first things we notice in this dream is an amazing universalism. It does not say some men, but it says all men. It does not say all white men, but it says all men,

³³ King, “The Power of Nonviolence” in *A Testament of Hope*, 14-15, emphases added.

³⁴ The historical record suggests that Jefferson’s refusal to “adjust” to the premise behind slavery—that some human beings are inherently worth less than others was inconsistent—at best. Nevertheless, King cites him here as a staunch advocate for equality *despite* his psychological adjustment to and participation in the practice and structures of chattel slavery.

which includes black men. It does not say all Gentiles, but it says all men, which includes Jews. It does not say all Protestants, but it says all men, which includes Catholics.

And there is another thing we see in this dream that ultimately distinguishes democracy and our form of government from all of the totalitarian regimes that emerge in history. It says that each individual has certain basic rights that are neither conferred nor derived from the state...

Ever since the *Founding Fathers* of our nation dreamed this noble dream, America has been something of a schizophrenic personality, tragically divided against herself. On the one hand we have proudly professed *the principles of democracy*, and on the other hand we have sadly practiced the very antithesis of those principles. Indeed slavery and segregation have been strange paradoxes in a nation founded on *the principle that all men are created equal*. This is what the Swedish sociologist, Gunnar Myrdal, referred to as the American dilemma.³⁵

Here, one again observes King's interpretation of the threats posed by a segregated American society through the symbols of the American-democratic political tradition. King draws on the potent symbol of the "American dream," connecting it to the "Founding Fathers'" vision for the United States and asserting that the "substance" of the "American dream" is in its essence esteem for "the principles of democracy" including the esteem for basic rights found in the Declaration of Independence's assertion of equal creation. He does so in order to make clear the stakes of failing to respect those political principles. In doing so, King interprets for his audience the threat faced by a divided and unequal society that fails to live up to its own national, political ideals: a decidedly "schizophrenic personality."

In the third instance under consideration, an essay that King delivered before a 1962 church conference entitled "The Ethical Demands for Integration," King also appeals to political symbolism from the American-democratic tradition. In this essay, King both argues for the goal of integration (as opposed to mere desegregation) and explores the ethical demands that this the ideal of integration makes on a political community once that community adopts it as its own. In

³⁵ King, "The American Dream" (1961) in *A Testament of Hope*, 208, emphases added. King also gave a version of this speech in New Jersey at Drew University in 1964, and another in honor of Independence Day on July 4, 1965. That day he also delivered a sermon by this same name at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, though the sermon departs substantially from the other versions of the speech.

his interpretation of “the goal of integration” as the “ultimate goal of our national community,” King invokes the symbolism of the Declaration, and Frederick Douglass’s lecture on the U.S. Constitution.³⁶ Specifically, in his reflections on the first of three “ethical demands of integration,” which King refers to under the heading of “The Worth of Persons,” King invokes the Declaration’s assertion of equal creation and equal rights, and cites Frederick Douglass’s corroborating interpretation of the Constitution. He explains that Americans’ political heritage recognizes this worth of persons in its understanding of human beings as created beings who are endowed with inalienable rights:

This idea of the dignity and worth of human personality is *expressed eloquently and unequivocally in the Declaration of Independence*. “All men,” it says, “are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Never has a sociopolitical document proclaimed more profoundly and eloquently the sacredness of human personality.

Frederick Douglass stated the same truth in his lecture on the Constitution of the United States. He says “Its language is, ‘We the people’; not we the white people not even we the citizens but we the people...we the human inhabitants; and if Negroes are people they are included in the benefits for which the Constitution of America was ordained and established.”³⁷

King invokes these American-democratic symbols in order to explain why desegregation is an ultimately inadequate political goal, to interpret both the reasons why integration is a worthier political ideal, and to explain the nature of the ethical demands it makes on a political community once adopted. In doing so, he draws on the language of the American-democratic political tradition to explain the shortcomings of the ideal of desegregation and the relative merits of the ideal of integration.

It is worth noting that, although King invokes multiple symbols from the American-democratic political tradition, the Declaration of Independence’s assertion of the equal creation

³⁶ King, “The Ethical Demands for Integration” in *A Testament of Hope*, 118.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 119, emphases added.

of human beings and their endowment with inalienable rights holds primacy of place. I believe this is no accident on King's part. Rather, as I suggested in the beginning of the chapter, King's consistent reference to this sentence in the Declaration of Independence is a function of his contention that it contains the specific beliefs required by American democracy—its “creed” as King puts it.³⁸ Indeed, in each of the above instances, King invokes what he takes to be some core beliefs required by the American-democratic political tradition and interprets American society in their light. In doing so, King's use of political symbolism in these passages explicitly references and invokes what I have called American democracy's political ethic of belief.

Religious Symbols: King's Christian Personalism

Yet, this American-democratic ethic of belief is not the only one that King invokes in these passages. In addition, these passages are rich in Christian, personalist symbolism, which King uses to invoke an ethic of belief grounded in the Christian tradition: belief in the value and worth of persons as created in the image of God. For this reason, before returning to these passages, a word of context on King's Christian Personalism proves instructive.

As I noted at the start of the chapter, King's theological and philosophical influences are well-documented, and a full exposition of these influences are beyond the scope of this chapter. Nevertheless, scholars agree that underlying King's commitment to nonviolence and social activism was a Christian personalism that combined his formative upbringing at home and in the Black church, his studies at Crozer Seminary and Boston University—in particular, the influences of the Boston personalists as well as Hegel, Kant, and Gandhi.³⁹ In his thoroughgoing

³⁸ King, “I Have A Dream” in *A Testament of Hope*, 219.

³⁹ John J. Ansbro, *Martin Luther King, Jr. The Making of a Mind* (1982); Rufus Burrow, *God and Human Dignity* (2006); Garth Baker-Fletcher, *Somebodyness* (1993).

study of the intellectual development of King's Christian Personalism, Rufus Burrow outlines its basic features:

Personalism teaches that persons are the highest intrinsic values, and ultimate reality is personal. If one is also a theist, as King was, it means, further, that God is both personal and is that Being on which all other beings depend for their existence. God is the fundamental source of the whole of reality as well as the ground of human dignity. King is not selective in this regard. That is, his conviction is that *every* person, regardless of race, gender, class, ability, age, health, or sexuality is a being of absolute worth, because every person is created and loved by a supremely personal God. Each person is infinitely valuable to God, and therefore should be treated as such.⁴⁰

As Burrow makes clear, King's Christian personalism entailed the conviction that all human beings are equally bearers of infinite worth on the bases of their creation by and relationship to God. And as I will show below, it is on this decidedly personalist interpretation of Christian doctrine of creation *imago dei* that King identifies the Christian ethic of belief that overlaps with American democracy's ethic of belief. However, I first need to demonstrate how the symbols of this Christian personalism pervade King's social criticism, including the overlapping interpretations under review.

In each of the instances under consideration, one observes that King invokes Christian and personalist symbolism alongside the political symbolism discussed above. The two most important and consistent of these symbols are the symbol of the creation of human beings in the image of God and the symbol of human personality. In both cases, King invokes these symbols to express the belief that human beings are bearers of intrinsic, inalienable value.

Returning to King's various discussions of the need to be psychologically "maladjusted" to the forces of segregation and discrimination in American society, one observes a prime example of King's basic approach, though one that does not explicitly invoke the symbolism of

⁴⁰ Rufus Burrow, Jr., *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006) 7.

the image of God and human personality that will characterize the following to examples. Here, one observes that King's political symbolism of Lincoln, Jefferson, and the Declaration discussed above is sandwiched between an appeal to the prophetic visions of Amos and Jesus of Nazareth:

Modern psychology has a word that is probably used more than any other word. It is the word "maladjusted." Now we should all seek to live a well adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities. But there are some things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I call upon you to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination. In ever intend to adjust myself to mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic effects of the methods of physical violence and to tragic militarism. I call on you to be maladjusted to such things [segregation and discrimination]. *I call upon you to be as maladjusted as Amos who in the midst of the injustices of his day cried out in words that echo across the generation, 'Let judgment run down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.'* As maladjusted as Abraham Lincoln who had the vision to see that this nation could not exist half slave and half free. As maladjusted as Jefferson who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery could cry out, 'All men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty and happiness.' *As maladjusted as Jesus of Nazareth who dreamed a dream of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. God grant that we will be so maladjusted that we will be able to go out and change our world and our civilization. And then we will be able to move from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.*⁴¹

At one level, King invokes the prophetic social visions of both Amos and Jesus of Nazareth in order to make clear that psychological adjustment to segregation and discrimination in American society will hinder one's ability to critique and change that society. Yet, he also does so immediately preceding and following his invocation of Lincoln, Jefferson, and the Declaration of Independence. In doing so, King's invocation of these religious symbols in addition to the political symbols creates an interpretation that operates in an overlapping way: it simultaneously references the social meanings attached to both the political and religious symbols invoked. To the degree that his interpretation draws explicitly on the shared features of each of these four

⁴¹ King, "The Power of Nonviolence" in *A Testament of Hope*, 14-15, emphases added.

social critics—they are American Founding Fathers and two prophetic biblical voices who in each case refuses to accommodate himself to the unjust society in which he finds himself—King’s appeals to the shared meanings of these political and religious symbols specifically to draw his audience’s attention to *overlap* between them. Through this juxtaposition, King suggests that all of these figures were maladjusted to certain injustices in their societies; each and every one of them helps us to know how to know how to identify and respond to the injustices in ours.

Beyond a general appeal to religious symbolism and imagery in his writing and speaking, King specifically invokes the Christian doctrine of the creation in the image of God and the symbol of human personality in order to identify the specific overlap that he sees between American democracy’s and Christianity’s normative commitments. His appeal to these symbols and their connection to American democracy’s “creed” is extremely apparent in our second and third examples.

In “The American Dream,” King identifies the specific difference between American democracy as a form of government and totalitarian regimes to be the “substance” of the American dream’s belief that human beings as created equal and thus bear certain inalienable rights. King makes sense of the Declaration’s belief-claim in decidedly religious terms, making sense of the rights in question as God-given:

As you go out today to enter the clamorous highways of life, I should like to discuss with you some aspects of the American dream. For in a real sense, America is essentially a dream, a dream as yet unfulfilled. It is a dream of a land where men of all races, of all nationalities and of all creeds can life together as brothers. The substance of the dream is expressed in these sublime words, words lifted to cosmic proportions: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This is the dream.

One of the first things we notice in this dream is an amazing universalism. It does not say some men, but it says all men. It does not say all white men, but it says all men,

which includes black men. It does not say all Gentiles, but it says all men, which includes Jews. It does not say all Protestants, but it says all men, which includes Catholics.

And there is another thing we see in this dream that ultimately distinguishes democracy and democracy and our form of government from all of the totalitarian regimes that emerge in history. It says that each individual has certain basic rights that are neither conferred nor derived from the state. *To discover where they came from it is necessary to move back behind the dim mist of eternity, for they are God-given. Very seldom if ever in this history of the world has a sociopolitical document expressed in such profoundly eloquent and unequivocal language the dignity and worth of human personality. The American dream reminds us that every man is heir to the legacy of worthiness.*

Ever since the Founding Fathers of our nation dreamed this noble dream, America has been something of a schizophrenic personality, tragically divided against herself. On the one hand we have proudly professed the principles of democracy, and on the other hand we have sadly practiced the very antithesis of those principles. Indeed slavery and segregation have been strange paradoxes in a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal. This is what the Swedish sociologist, Gunnar Myrdal, referred to as the American dilemma.⁴²

Here King characterizes the beliefs required by the tradition of American democracy—that human beings were created as equal and rights-bearing creatures—in decidedly religious terms. He interprets the meaning of the Declaration’s words by claiming that the rights in question are “God-given,” asserting that the document expresses a truth about the “dignity and worth of human personality.” In doing so, King already suggests the overlap he sees between the normative and doxastic dimensions of American democracy and Christianity.

Furthermore, in a later version of this speech, delivered on July 4, 1965 as an Independence Day Sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, King makes explicit the religious beliefs that he understands to be relevant to American democracy’s “creed.” In it, King explicitly identifies the overlap to be the connection between the doctrine of man’s creation *imago dei*, in the image of God, and the corresponding value and worth of human personality. Here his statement further elaborates what he means by the assertion that the rights both he and the Declaration of Independence have in mind are “God-given”:

⁴² King, “The American Dream” (1961) in *A Testament of Hope*, 208.

You see, the founding fathers were really influenced by the Bible. The whole concept of the *imago dei*, as it is expressed in Latin, the "image of God," is the idea that all men have something within them that God injected. Not that they have substantial unity with God, but that every man has a capacity to have fellowship with God. And this gives him a uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity. And we must never forget this as a nation: there are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God. One day we will learn that. (Yes) We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man.⁴³

In this passage, King uses the symbol of *imago dei* to interpret the meaning of the Declaration's words for his audience. His interpretation makes sense of the Founders' assertion that "all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights" in terms of the Christian doctrine of creation in the image and likeness of God. King reasons that the creator in question is presumably the Christian God, who created human beings in her image. Moreover, this creation means that human beings are bearers of personality, intrinsically valuable, dignified creatures. Therefore, he explains, both the equality and the inalienable rights that the Declaration mentions are a function of precisely their creation in God's image.

In these ways, King invokes political and religious symbols specifically to draw his audience's attention to *overlap* in their meanings. He also specifically does so by making sense of those political ideals (i.e. from the Declaration of Independence) in Christian and personalist terms. In so doing, he aims to clarify and interpret a social ideal—in this case the American dream—and to make plain the stakes involved in falling short of it.

Returning to the third instance under consideration, one also observes that King's invocation of the American-democratic symbolism discussed above occurs within the context of rich religious and philosophical symbolism. In this section, King discusses the connections

⁴³ Martin Luther King, Jr., "The American Dream" (1965) in *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration From the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.* ed. Clayborn Carson and Peter Holloran, (Warner Books, Inc., New York: 1998), 88.

between social ideal of integration and the “worth of human persons,” explaining why segregation (and even mere desegregation) stands opposed to recognition of and respect for the value of human persons:

There must be a recognition of the sacredness of human personality. Deeply rooted in our political and religious heritage is the conviction that every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth. *Our Hebraic-Christian tradition refers to this inherent dignity of man in the Biblical term the image of God. This innate worth referred to in the phrase the image of God is universally shared in equal portions by all men. There is no grades scale of essential worth; there is no divine right of one race which differs from the divine right of another. Every human being has etched in his personality the indelible stamp of the Creator.*

This idea of the dignity and worth of human personality is expressed eloquently and unequivocally in the Declaration of Independence. “All men,” it says, “are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Never has a sociopolitical document proclaimed more profoundly and eloquently the sacredness of human personality.

Frederick Douglass stated the same truth in his lecture on the Constitution of the United States. He says “Its language is, ‘We the people’; not we the white people not even we the citizens but we the people...we the human inhabitants; and if Negroes are people they are included in the benefits for which the Constitution of America was ordained and established.

*Segregation stands diametrically opposed to the principle of the sacredness of human personality. It debases personality. Immanuel Kant said in one formulation of the Categorical Imperative that “all men must be treated as ends and never as mere means.” The tragedy of segregation is that it treats men as means rather than ends, and thereby reduces them to things rather than persons. To use the words of Martin Buber, segregation substitutes an “I-it” relationship for the “I-thou” relationship. ... But man is not a thing. He must be dealt with not as an “animated tool,” but as a person sacred in himself. To do otherwise is to depersonalize the potential person and desecrate what he is. So long as the Negro is treated as a means to an end, so long as he is seen as anything less than a person of sacred worth, the image of God is abused in him and consequently and proportionately lost by those who inflict the abuse. Only by establishing a truly integrated society can we return to the Negro the quality of “thouness” which is his due because of the nature of his being.*⁴⁴

In his elaboration of the first “ethical demand of integration,” King not only appeals to the political symbols discussed above, but he also appeals to the symbols of human personality, the “Hebraic-Christian tradition” and its doctrine of creation *imago dei*, as well as Immanuel Kant’s

⁴⁴ King, “The Ethical Demands for Integration” in *A Testament of Hope*, 118-19, emphases added.

Categorical Imperative and philosopher Martin Buber's notion of an "I-thou" relationship. In doing so, he indicts the segregated status-quo in light of the social ideal of integration, which he makes sense of for his audience in distinctly religious and philosophical (in addition to political) terms.

The Overlap: Dignity as "Our Political and Religious Heritage"

As these three instances make clear, King draws on multiple traditions and sources in his social criticism and he uses them simultaneously, freely intermixing symbolism as he sees fit. Specifically, they suggest that King engages overlapping interpretations that draw consistently on the overlapping meanings of political and religious symbols, in order to both indict the segregated American society of his time and provide a vision of a better alternative. Yet, what more can be said about this overlap itself? What's the content that King's overlapping interpretations reference?

I argue that "dignity" is the name that King gives, neither singly to the political part of Americans' heritage, nor to the religious aspects of this heritage, but to their *overlap*. As I noted at the start of this chapter, this is, on the one hand, an uncontroversial claim; many scholars who write on King note King's use of both political and religious symbols in the course of their respective analyses. However, on the other hand, they do so without pausing to explore its dynamics and implications. Therefore, I will dwell a moment on both the rhetorical and conceptual overlap that appears in the above passages.

First, a word on the rhetorical overlap. In tracing out the political and religious symbols as they appear in these passages, I have already traced this rhetorical overlap in some detail. King routinely intermixes political and religious symbolism in each of the three instances under

consideration, and also throughout his writing and speaking more generally. I will only further note one rhetorical pattern that arises frequently in King's overlapping interpretations and which further evinces the overlapping nature of the meanings that he identifies through his simultaneous invocation religious and political symbolism.

King often demonstrates the overlap rhetorically by sandwiching religious symbolism between American-democratic symbolism or vice versa. For example, the quoted sections of "The American Dream" and "Ethical Demands for Integration" follow this pattern quite explicitly.⁴⁵ Returning to the relevant section of the American Dream, where in the parallel structure of King's invocations of to various political and religious prophets, we find the American-democratic prophets flanked on both sides by the Hebraic-Christian prophets:

I call upon you to be as maladjusted as *Amos* who in the midst of the injustices of his day cried out in words that echo across the generation, 'Let judgment run down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.' As maladjusted as *Abraham Lincoln* who had the vision to see that this nation could not exist half slave and half free. As maladjusted as *Jefferson* who in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery could cry out, 'All men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty and happiness.' As maladjusted as *Jesus of Nazareth* who dreamed a dream of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. God grant that we will be so maladjusted that we will be able to go out and change our world and our civilization.⁴⁶

Here the overlap is unmistakable. King's movement from invoking religious symbols, to political symbols, back to religious symbolism expresses rhetorically the overlap that King is trying to convey that exists among the normative dimensions of Americas political and religious heritages. While there are plenty of exceptions to this rhetorical pattern in King's respective invocations of religious and political symbolism, I argue that it arises with enough frequency to suggest that the

⁴⁵ For further particularly striking instances of this rhetorical strategy, see King's defense against the white clergy in Birmingham's allegation of extremism in "The Letter from Birmingham Jail" as well as in his closing arguments against adopting a politics of despair in "Remaining Awake Through A Great Revolution," in *A Testament of Hope*, 297-98, 277-78.

⁴⁶ King, "The American Dream" (1961) in *A Testament of Hope*, 208, emphases added.

pattern it rhetorically expresses is precisely the overlap in meaning which is the object of this study.

Second and even more striking is the conceptual overlap that King brings out in his overlapping interpretations. He describes this conceptual overlap most clearly and consistently with the symbol of dignity. In at least two places, King relates all three constituent elements of his overlapping interpretations: the political dimension, the religious dimension, and their overlap. In the concluding section of an essay entitled, “Who Speaks for the South,” King prefaces his appeal to the silent majority of “southerners of good will” to stand in solidarity with the movement by invoking three distinct but related symbols. He writes: “In the *name of God*, in the *interest of human dignity*, and for the *cause of democracy*, I appeal to these millions to gird their courage, to speak out and to act on their basic convictions.”⁴⁷ In doing so, King inserts “human dignity” as a middle term of sorts that stands between, and mediates between, God and democracy. By using these three symbols, he cites three warrants, three authorities, for his prophetic call; and in so doing King appeals to both the American-democratic political tradition as well as the Christian religious tradition simultaneously. His appeal suggests that the concept of dignity works to mediate between the normative dimensions of American democracy and those of Christianity.

King makes this conceptual overlap clearest, however, in “The Ethical Demands for Integration.” In this essay, one observes a direct statement of King’s overlapping interpretation of American democracy’s and Christianity’s normative dimensions as well as his simultaneous appeal to their overlapping ethics of belief—and the point of overlap is again dignity. He writes that, “Deeply rooted in our *political* and *religious* heritage is the conviction that every man is an

⁴⁷ King, “Who Speaks for the South” in *A Testament of Hope*, 93, emphases added.

heir to a legacy of *dignity* and worth.”⁴⁸ He makes plain that he views the belief that human beings are valuable, worthy, and dignified creatures to constitute a direct overlap between the beliefs of the American political tradition and its religious inheritance. In this instance, King explicitly identifies dignity as the point of overlap.

Furthermore, in the formulation found in “Ethical Demands,” King again uses the concept of dignity as a middle term that enables him to bring religious symbolism and political symbolism together in his interpretation. Such overlapping usage enables him to claim, on the one hand, that “Our Hebraic-Christian tradition refers to this inherent *dignity* of man in the Biblical term *the image of God*,” and a few lines later also that “This idea of the *dignity* and worth of human personality is expressed eloquently and unequivocally in the Declaration of Independence. ‘All men,’ it says, ‘are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among these are life liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’ Never has a sociopolitical document proclaimed more profoundly and eloquently the sacredness of human personality.”⁴⁹ His overlapping strategy enables him to interpret both Christian doctrine as well as the doctrines of the American-democratic political tradition *with the same term*: dignity. Using the symbol of dignity in this way enables King to identify, access, and appeal to a singular, overlapping “shared heritage” that he takes to be both religious and political.

In doing so, King identifies the overlap in both a certain Christian ethic of belief that flows from the Christian doctrine of creation in the image of God, and a certain political ethic of belief that flows from American democracy’s political anthropology, particularly as it is expressed by the founders in the Declaration of Independence. On King’s overlapping interpretation, both sets of beliefs entail the belief in human dignity, the worth and value of

⁴⁸ King, “The Ethical Demands for Integration” in *A Testament of Hope*, 118, emphases added.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 118-19.

human persons. In making this plain, King not only engages in social criticism that is informed by both religious beliefs and political convictions. His interpretations also provide evidence that suggests that the content of American democracy's political ethic of belief—that in which it requires belief—is a humanistic axiology. His overlapping interpretations help us see that the American-democratic political tradition requires not only belief those things which are explicitly stated in, for example, the Declaration of Independence: that human beings are equal and bearers of inalienable rights. Rather, King's interpretations suggest that view of human beings as equal and rights-bearing creatures rests on and implies a more fundamental belief in the value of human beings—or in King's words, their dignity.⁵⁰

King's estimation of the power of the overlapping meanings of these political and religious symbols, both in King's interpretations as well as an active force in history, cannot be overstated. As King warns the white clergy of Birmingham:

One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for *the best in the American dream* and the *most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage*, and thusly, carrying out our whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.⁵¹

⁵⁰ It is no surprise, then, that in *To Shape A New World*, the most recent and most comprehensive effort to explore King's legacy as a political philosopher in his own right, Jonathan L. Walton identifies great consensus among the book's contributors that King's contribution to political philosophy lies in his conception of and advocacy for human dignity. He writes: "The creative synthesis that emerges out of King's theological commitments stands out for me as the overarching theme of this volume. The important place of human dignity in King's political thought and action seems to be the conceptual thread that runs through each of the essays." While Walton correctly identifies the important role of dignity in King's political philosophy as well as helpfully describes King's overlapping approach in terms of a "creative synthesis," he misidentifies it as disproportionately a function of King's theological commitments, rather than a function of both his membership in and commitments to both the American-democratic political tradition and Baptist Christianity.

⁵¹ King, "The Letter from Birmingham City Jail," in *A Testament of Hope*, 302, emphases added.

With such overlapping interpretations, King makes clear: the nonviolent protestors sitting-in at lunch counters were not standing up for something parochial, partisan, or foreign. Rather, they were standing up for something that Americans *share*. They were standing up for dignity.

Conclusion

At this point one begins to see the way in which both King's social criticism as well as the humanistic axiology that it names and to which it appeals mediates between political norms and religious norms. Observing the details of this overlap enables one to draw three conclusions about its implication for democratic theory. First, the example of King makes clear that the overlap in question is on normative matters. Second, the above analysis suggests that King's overlapping interpretations routinely engages democracy's psychological and doxastic dimensions. I have shown how King's statements suggest that he understood the invocation of specifically political beliefs—America's "creed"—to be a key strategy to overcome the eclipse of democratic consciousness by the myth of racial inferiority. Third, King's statements make clear that the overlap is dialogic and hermeneutic in nature: it emerges only in and through King's interpretation. King's statements also suggest neither America's political "creed" nor Christianity's doctrine of creation *imago dei* are self-interpreting, but that they both sometimes require elaboration in other terms.

King's overlapping interpretations constitute evidence that religious social critics can and often do work semiotically and hermeneutically to mediate between the normative dimensions of religion and politics in American society. Religious social critics like King identify and utilize symbols which appeal to the social meanings that are shared among their audience and in doing so bring those shared meanings to bear on the society that they critique. In the case of King, this

involves repeated reflection on and interpretation—in overlapping terms—of the meaning of America’s “creed.”

Thus, King provides us the second example of a religious social critic who finds himself, like all other Americans, equally required to believe certain things by the tradition of American democracy. It is in response to this belief-requirement that we see him reconciling those beliefs with his broader religious worldview. It is clear that, despite this requirement, King feels himself free to make sense of the beliefs American democracy has traditionally required in the terms which he finds most meaningful. Focusing on these features of King’s religious social criticism, we again observe the ways that the American democracy’s humanistic axiology and political ethic of belief help order society to the ideals of liberty and equality amidst the reality of religious diversity, and that they do so hermeneutically.

5. Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Divine Pathos and Human Being as a Category of Value

Human being is being *sui generis*. The only adequate way to grasp its meaning is to think of man in human terms. Human is more than a concept of fact; it is a category of value, of the highest of all values available to us.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Patient as a Person"

The Bible is a book about man. It is not a theology from the point of view of man but rather an anthropology from the point of view of God.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who Is Man?*

I felt again what I have been thinking about for years—that Jewish religious institutions have again missed a great opportunity, namely, to interpret a civil-rights movement in terms of Judaism. The vast number of Jews participating actively in it are totally unaware of what the movement means in terms of the prophetic traditions.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, unpublished memoir¹

Introduction

By the mid-1960s, Abraham Joshua Heschel had become one of the most well-known rabbis in America, famous for his published works on the Hebrew prophets and Jewish theology as well for as his social activism. Yet, in 1940, scarcely twenty years prior, he had arrived in the United States as a political and religious refugee who was fleeing Nazi persecution in Europe. He was only able to secure a visa with much effort and assistance. Ultimately, it was due to his reputation as a scholar and as leader in the Hasidic movement of Judaism, his professional connections, and the persistent efforts of the acting president of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Julius Morgenstern, that it was granted. Thanks to Morgenstern's efforts, Heschel narrowly escaped the tragic fate that awaited his family members who were not able to flee their native Poland. Despite speaking little English or having many connections in the United States, Heschel embraced his new language and homeland with zeal; he quickly made both his own.

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996). Cited by Susannah Heschel in the Introduction.

At the risk of opening this chapter with an anecdote that begins, “Two Jews walked into a bar...”, a vignette from Heschel’s early days in Cincinnati illuminates this point well. Heschel started his life in the United States, after a brief sojourn in New York City, teaching at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. There, Heschel began working with rabbinical student, Herbert Drooze, to improve his English in exchange for tutoring Drooze in Hebrew, and:

When Drooze introduced him to American beer at a local restaurant, which he loved, the rabbi enjoyed witty back-and-forth banter with the waitress. Upon leaving the establishment, Heschel placed his hands on Drooze’s shoulder’s and said, “America is a wonderful country.” When Drooze asked why, Heschel responded: “America is a wonderful country because that waitress *really* believes that she is just as good as I am.” Unlike in Europe, where a university professor was seen as elite, here he and the waitress were equals. The American self-respect and easygoing comradery had touched Dr. Heschel profoundly,” Drooze recalled.²

While this anecdote is both humorous and charming, it is also portentous. It provides us perhaps Heschel’s earliest direct reference to American democracy’s political ethic of belief. In it, he appears taken with the fact that Americans, for whatever reason, could and did hold different *beliefs* about their compatriots (even him!) than their European counterparts. Specifically, he extols a jovial interaction with this local waitress as evidence that the waitress understood Heschel to be her equal; she thought she was “just as good,” as him. Though Heschel would quickly become critical of the middle class, bourgeois, and consumerist attitude of the rabbinical students he encountered at Hebrew Union College, he clearly embraced other aspects of American culture, attitudes, and ideals. Chief among them was Americans’ deeply held, if imperfectly actualized, belief in equality.

Heschel’s attitude in this interaction is also portentous for the purposes of this chapter. It foreshadows an approach he would adopt in his religious social criticism and the social activism

² Julian E. Zeiler, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A life of Radical Amazement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 53.

that would increasingly characterize his career, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. As I will demonstrate, Heschel understands American-democratic ideals to obligate Americans to believe in the equality of their compatriots—and more broadly their human dignity, upon which this equality is based. This observation already invites inquiry into Heschel’s understanding of American democracy’s political ethic of belief because it suggests that his statements provide evidence of its existence and his interpretations of its content.

Even more importantly for the task at hand, when Heschel references the beliefs that he takes to be required by American democracy, he often does so to highlight the overlap between the American political tradition and his Jewish theology of pathos which he understands to flow directly from the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. While a direct and overt appeal to this overlap is not Heschel’s most frequent strategy for articulating his religious social criticism, he adopts this strategy at multiple points in his socially and politically oriented speeches and writings. Focusing on these instances, it becomes clear that Heschel hopes to make plain, albeit in subtler ways than Murray and King, that the American-democratic tradition recognizes the key insight of the theological anthropology of the Hebrew prophets: human beings are valuable because they are objects of both God’s creation and, crucially, his divine concern.³ Doing so, Heschel brings the semiotic resources of both traditions to bear on problems that he sees facing American Jewry, American society, and humanity in the mid-twentieth century.

Heschel thought there were manifold challenges to be faced. As I will show below, he believed that this overlapping politico-religious insight—that human being is a category of value—had been eclipsed by various force of modernity both in American culture and society as well as among American Jewry. Though he discusses this state of affairs in many places and

³ See below section, “Heschel’s Philosophy of Religion and Theology of Pathos”.

under multiple rubrics, the most comprehensive name that he provides for this set of developments is the “eclipse of humanity.”

Heschel asks his audiences to consider the question: “Is it not conceivable that our entire civilization is built upon a misinterpretation of man?”⁴ Heschel answers in the affirmative and he uses this umbrella category, “eclipse of humanity” to refer to those ideological and technological forces that characterize modern Western civilization and have at their core this misinterpretation of what it means to be human. Heschel believes these forces and this anthropology have combined to have obfuscated a better, and more “biblical” understanding of human beings and human value.⁵

These forces are many and diverse, and Heschel is neither clear or consistent across his writings and speeches regarding which specific forces of modern, Western civilization he has in mind. However, it is clear that Heschel has in mind many of the major economic, technological, and geopolitical developments of the twentieth century: At minimum, Heschel suggests that these forces include the rapid pace and unbridled development of new technologies, the rise of fascist and totalitarian governments and ideologies, racism, militarism, capitalism and consumer culture, as well as scientific, logical, behavioral, sociological, and psychological positivism. The common thread among these forces is that each assumes, embodies and/or advances an understanding of the human being characterized by “expediency”: one that understands human beings’ primary purpose to be satisfying their own needs and desires and understands the world and its resources as a means to do so.⁶

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 5-6.

⁵ Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 236.

⁶ Heschel, *Who Is Man?*, 20-21.

While I will discuss this “eclipse of humanity” at length below, it suffices at this point to note that the term denotes for Heschel the loss of an individual and collective self-understanding of “human” as denoting a “category of value,” and one that is specifically value based on human beings’ in their relation to the transcendent God: a “disclosure of the divine,” created in the likenesses of God, and who is an ongoing object of God’s divine concern (more on which below).⁷ In his sustained response to this “eclipse of humanity,” Heschel aims to bring Western civilization, and American society in particular, out of this eclipse by raising Americans’ consciousness to a better understanding of human being which can account for these spiritual and axiological realities.⁸

In doing so, Heschel appeals to *both* the insights of this theology of pathos as well as the American-democratic tradition. By appealing to the overlap in these traditions, Heschel exemplifies a religious social critic, a Deweyan-Walzerian prophet of the Public such as are the objects of this study. This chapter’s specific focus on Heschel’s references to American democracy’s political ethic of belief will help us to see that at key points, Heschel’s religious social criticism was and is an overlapping interpretation in Jewish and American-democratic terms, aimed at making plain and revivifying the shared humanistic axiology that Heschel believes has been eclipsed.

There is one further reason for choosing Heschel for this study, even if his references to American democracy are fewer than those of Murray or King. Namely, I aim to show that one need not have been the leader of the Civil Rights Movement, nor written an entire monograph about the relationship of Catholicism to American democracy, to be understood to be engaging

⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Patient as a Person,” in *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux: 1966), 25.

⁸ For a fuller discussion of the “eclipse of humanity,” see below section “An ‘Eclipse of Humanity’”.

in the kind of overlapping interpretations with which we are concerned here. Rather, by including Heschel in this study, I aim to show that even when religious social critics engage in such references to American democracy's ideals and its political ethic of belief infrequently or intuitively, such instances remain overlapping interpretations of the sort that concern us and provide important evidence in support of the mediating function of religious social critics between religious and political values in American democracy.

An Obscure Overlap

Neither this overlap nor its implications have been fully appreciated in scholarship about Heschel's thought. Heschel is often and rightly remembered as a Jewish leader, intellectual, and theologian whose religious commitments grounded and inspired the social activism for which he became famous.⁹ This activism began long before the civil rights movement, just a few short years after he arrived at the port of New York. In 1943, Heschel engaged in his first public act of social activism and religious social criticism in his new home: he marched with a group of rabbis in Washington, D.C. demanding that the U.S. government respond more aggressively to the ongoing efforts to exterminate Jews.¹⁰ While it would be a full decade before the start of the period of Heschel's life that was characterized by intense social activism, Heschel's participation in the rabbi's march was as portentous as his encounter with the waitress in Cleveland. As biographer Julian E. Zeiler puts it, "The rabbis' march gave Heschel his first real taste of grassroots activism in the pursuit of justice. In DC, he saw firsthand the power of protesters who

⁹ Julian E. Zeiler's recent biography of Heschel, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A life of Radical Amazement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), is a good example of this approach. Zeiler thoroughly traces these connections in his work, even if he reads Heschel's life and activism a bit too narrowly through the lens of Heschel's "progressive politics," when Heschel's activism and political commitments seem at many points to defy such easy categorization.

¹⁰ Zeiler, 60.

were not tethered to the establishment, free to shake up the status quo, and criticize people in power, whether they were Jewish leaders or elected officials.”¹¹

The march represents Heschel’s first foray not only into social activism in the United States, but into religious social criticism. It is the first in what would become a long list of projects through which Heschel brought Jewish tradition and teaching to bear on the problems facing American democracy. Indeed, the rabbi’s march foreshadows a career that was characterized by trenchant, religious social criticism and activism aimed at advancing the rights of African-Americans, advocating for Jews around the world (including in Israel and the Soviet Union), awakening the spiritual lives of complacent American Jews, and bringing a halt to what he saw as the unconscionable War in Vietnam. Particularly important in Heschel’s career of religious social criticism would be his decision to march beside Martin Luther King, Jr. in the civil rights march in Selma, Alabama (which would catapult Heschel to the position of highest-profile Jewish religious leader speaking out in favor of the rights of African-Americans), and his vigorous anti-Vietnam war activism, which continued until his death in 1972. As we will see, the thread running through all of these campaigns was Heschel’s consistent and concerted effort to revivify the humanistic axiology mentioned above.

Heschel himself made plain the connections between his religious commitments and social activism frequently. He did so most characteristically in his politically and socially oriented writings and speeches by referencing his theology of pathos and insights derived from the Hebrew prophets. Indeed, the role of the Hebrew prophets in Heschel’s theology, thought, and social activism cannot be understated: very late in his life, Heschel himself credited the Hebrew prophets with teaching him that he had “to be involved in the affairs of man, in the

¹¹ Ibid., 61.

affairs of suffering man,” instead of remaining holed up in his study.¹² Heschel’s legacy as a social activist and critic is a testament to how seriously he took this lesson.

Two Approaches

Application

Heschel’s biographers and scholarly interpreters generally account for these dynamics in their analysis by treating his social activism and criticism as specifically *religious* social criticism.¹³ They depict Heschel’s social criticism as inspired and motivated by his Jewish commitments, and they note the Jewish ideas, teachings, stories, and texts upon which Heschel cites as a basis for his various critiques. In doing so, scholars tend to conceive of and discuss Heschel’s social activism and critic in the terms of “application.” While this approach is justified as well as illuminating in many ways, it limits one’s ability to fully observe and appreciate the dynamics and implications of Heschel’s overlapping interpretations in religious and political terms—and thus adopting it for this chapter would prove counterproductive.

Many of Heschel’s interpreters discuss his social criticism in a way that construes it as drawing only on *one tradition* for inspiration, understanding, and articulation, and in doing so, deemphasize or entirely miss the overlapping and hermeneutic nature of such statements. Their treatments suggest that he straightforwardly *applies* an religious idea, insight, or teaching to a

¹² Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 399.

¹³ For examples of the application paradigm, see: Daniel Breslauer, “Heschel’s Politics of Nostalgia” in *Journal of Church and State* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1980); Susannah Heschel, “A Different Kind of Theo-Politics: Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Prophets and the Civil Rights Movement” in *Political Theology* 21, nos. 1-2 (2020): 23-42; Edward K. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America, 1940-1972* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Robert McAfee Brown, “Some Are Guilty, All Are Responsible: Heschel’s Social Ethics” in *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Exploring His Life and Thought*, ed. John C. Merkle (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985), 123-141; David Novak, “The Theopolitics of Abraham Joshua Heschel” in *Modern Judaism* 29, no. 1 (February 2009): 106-116; Julian E. Zeiler, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: A life of Radical Amazement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021).

discrete social or political situation to reach a conclusion about how to act with regard to that empirical reality. Such an approach obscures the fact that Heschel's conclusions and judgments arise not from the straightforward application of a tradition to a situation, but through his simultaneous interpretation(s) of multiple traditions of thought and practice—both the Jewish tradition and the American-democratic political tradition—as well as the American social status quo in light of that situation and those traditions. When these dynamics are obscured, it is difficult to appreciate the force of Heschel's appeals American democracy's political ethic of belief.

Take, for example, two early articles published in the 1980s, both of which deal explicitly with the relationship between Heschel's religious commitments and his political and social activism. S. Daniel Breslauer, in his 1980 article on Heschel's "politics of nostalgia," argues that Heschel's social criticism is fundamentally nostalgic: it "rests upon a remembered dream of an alternate way of living," namely that of Eastern European Jewry. While this central claim in itself does not necessarily entail reading the relationship between religion and politics in Heschel's thought through the paradigm of "application," Breslauer goes onto do so explicitly. According to Breslauer, Heschel "begins to *apply* the lessons learned from Eastern European Jewish life to American democracy."¹⁴ Moreover, Breslauer credits Heschel's success as a social critic precisely to the effectiveness of this application, writing that Heschel's "career as a leader in American Jewish political religion shows the fruits of this politics of nostalgia."¹⁵ In doing so, Breslauer suggests that the relationship between Heschel's Jewish upbringing and commitments and his social and political activism is simple and straightforward one: of applying some kind of "religious" insight to a political or social problem.

¹⁴ Daniel Breslauer, "Heschel's Politics of Nostalgia," 309, emphasis added.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Robert McAfee Brown's analysis in his 1985 article, "Some Are Guilty, All Are Responsible: Heschel's Social Ethics" evinces a similar approach.¹⁶ This article appears under the section heading of "Heschel as Social Critic and Ecumenist" in collection of essays that was the product of a Symposium on The Life and Thought of Abraham Joshua Heschel at the College of Saint Benedict in 1983. In it, McAfee Brown treats Heschel's religious tradition as a fund of resources for ready application in his social criticisms.

McAfee Brown structures his lecture around the premise that Judaism provided Heschel six resources in his social criticism: "a clue" (divine pathos), "a model" (Maimonides), "a source" (Hasidism), "a vehicle" (scripture), "a concentration" (the prophets), and "a stance" (moral madness).¹⁷ He then goes on to suggest by applying these six resources to the problems that confronted him, Heschel drew "a consequence" (moral outrage), formed "a conviction" (all are responsible), and reached "a conclusion" (the matter is urgent). Here we observe in the very structure of the essay the way that McAfee Brown understands Heschel's religion as a trove of various theological, textual, cultural, and conceptual resources which he *applied* productively to the day's social problems. (McAfee Brown focuses on Heschel's statements on race from the 1960s.)

McAfee Brown's more detailed treatment of each part of Heschel's social ethics further evinces this approach. Take, for example, McAfee Brown's following statement on scripture as a "vehicle:"

Steeped in the Bible from his early years, Heschel found it always *speaking anew to contemporary situations*. We cannot begin to understand his social ethics apart from this

¹⁶ Robert McAfee Brown, "Some Are Guilty, All Are Responsible: Heschel's Social Ethics," in *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Exploring His Life and Thought*, ed. John C. Merkle (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985), 123-141.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 125-234.

emphasis. His use of Scripture as a vehicle for insight into social ethics was pervasive, and I will share an example from each of his two lectures on religion and racism.¹⁸

Though McAfee Brown does not use the language of application to describe the ways he sees Heschel drawing on scripture to gain insight about what to do regarding the day's pressing social problems, there is clear evidence that the "vehicle" metaphor serves as a stand-in for the application paradigm. One might paraphrase McAfee Brown's stance as follows: because the Bible "speaks...to contemporary situations" it offers the social critic resources which he may *apply* to the problems he hopes to address in order to reach conclusions about how to be and act in response. The relationship between religion and politics/social action appears here as applied religion.

More recent Heschel scholarship also exhibits the influence of the application paradigm. The clearest and most sustained example of this approach to the relationship between religion and social activism in Heschel's thought is found in Edward K. Kaplan's 2007 biography of Heschel's life in the United States, *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in the United States 1940-1972*. Observe the way Kaplan frames his approach to Heschel's life in the book's introduction. Kaplan writes:

Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America traces how this observant Jew became a "spiritual radical" who judged contemporary life from the uncompromising viewpoint of a Hebrew prophet...he *applied* traditional Jewish sources to clarify pressing issues of personal piety, religious education, the relation between Israel and the Diaspora, interfaith negotiations, the Holocaust, and more. In his biblical idiom, he denounced American racism, the cultural genocide of Soviet Jews, and the arrogance of military thinking.¹⁹

Here, Kaplan frames his project as one of recounting the period of Heschel's life during which he became famous precisely for applying resources of the Jewish tradition to various social

¹⁸ Ibid., 130, emphasis added.

¹⁹ Edward K. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America, 1940-1972* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), x, emphasis added.

issues. Kaplan continues this approach throughout his telling and analysis of Heschel's life, and, indeed, his foundational claim that Heschel was what he calls a "spiritual radical" hinges on his ability to demonstrate that Heschel's social criticism is characterized by just this kind of religious application.

This approach is certainly justified and illuminating, as far as it goes. All of these scholars rightly note that, in a sense, Heschel does apply Jewish religious resources to pressing social and political problems. Yet, I would submit that these scholars' reliance on the religious application paradigm to make sense of Heschel's statements and actions limits their ability to notice Heschel's references to American democracy's political ethic of belief entirely, and consequently fail to appreciate the hermeneutic force of his statements as not only theological applications, but importantly overlapping interpretations.

I believe that this myopia is a result of the privilege that the application paradigm accords to Heschel's religious identity and commitments. As a consequence of creating a hierarchy that accords religion a privileged status, this approach fails to capture two key features of Heschel's social criticism: First, it misses the fact that multiple *kinds* of traditions of thought and practice (a religious tradition and a political tradition) inform Heschel's thinking, prose, and action. Second, and as a result, it misses the hermeneutic and dialogical nature of Heschel's statements as not invocations or applications, but *interpretations* of these traditions and the social status quo that bring these traditions into conversation with each other. And thus, they also prevent us from clearly observing the dynamics of democracy that I aim to highlight.

Kaplan's biography provides especially illuminating evidence on this point. As will become clear below, Heschel's 1960 speech at the White House' for the president's "Conference on Children and Youth," is one of Heschel's most important and clearest references to American

democracy's political ethic of belief. As such, it is a key instance of such an overlapping interpretation as are our concern here.

Yet, observe how the application paradigm structures Kaplan's reading to one of the two parts of the speech that directly references American democracy's political ethic of belief.

Kaplan writes of Heschel's speech:

Heschel's message was received with enthusiasm. He applied "moral and spiritual values" to social issues. Echoing resolutions against discrimination based on race, color, or creed, he stood behind the civil rights movement: "How can we speak of reverence for man and of the belief that all men are created equal without repenting the way we behave toward our brothers, the colored people of America?" In the language of a spiritual evolutionary, he thrilled the audience with a call for "*a radical reorientation of our thinking.*"²⁰

I will analyze the "Children and Youth" speech in greater depth below. For now, it is sufficient to note that Kaplan seems to miss the multiple references to American democracy's political ethic of belief in this speech, including Heschel's reference to the Declaration of Independence which Kaplan cites here. Furthermore, Kaplan does not situate Heschel's call for repentance and statements about the "reverence for man" and "the belief that all men are created equal" in relation to the other religious ideas/symbols that he cites in the speech (that to be a human is to be in relationship to the divine) or the American-democratic values he cites (Heschel's claim that "one of the supreme principles which we all regard as essential to American democracy is the sanctity of human life"). Rather than recognizing that Heschel's speech draws on *both* on Jewish symbols and on American-democratic symbols to levy his social criticism, Kaplan appears to assimilate Heschel's overlapping interpretation into the religious application paradigm. It seems that the religious application paradigm prevents him from recognizing both the reference to American democracy's political ethic of belief, as well as its relevance to his analysis.

²⁰ Ibid., 199.

Julian E. Zeiler's more recent biography avoids such a strong reliance on the religious application paradigm in his account of Heschel's social criticism by describing Heschel's social criticism as an effort not to simply apply Jewish values, but to "make Jewish values relevant" in contemporary politics and society. This is certainly a step toward accounting for Heschel's overlapping interpretations. Zeiler's reliance on the language of "relevance" seems better able to account for the dynamics I aim to trace here: namely, multiple symbolic traditions which overlap in and through an interpretation of a situation, not through the straightforward application of a single tradition to a situation. Nevertheless, the fact that Zeiler provides neither an account of American democracy's political ethic of belief nor Heschel's overlapping interpretations in his biography leaves one to wonder whether the language of "relevance" still largely operates for him as a stand-in for the religious application paradigm.

In all fairness, the myopic emphasis of the application paradigm is understandable among Heschel interpreters given that the Jewish symbolism in Heschel's accounts is pervasive, and the references to American democracy, and specifically American democracy's political ethic of belief, are comparatively few and sometimes rather obscure. At minimum, Heschel's relative silence about American democracy means that one must exercise caution when dealing with his references to American democracy's political ethic of belief.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Heschel understood his duty to engage in social criticism not only in religious terms, but political ones as well. Writing alongside Christian co-authors Robert McAfee Brown and Michael Novak in the Introduction to their collection of essays opposing the Vietnam War, Heschel makes it plain that this speaking out on the subject of Vietnam is both a duty for religious leaders as well as their civic duty. They write:

If it seems to some readers that a book addressed to the churches and synagogues should be more "religious" in tone and vocabulary, we can only respond that any discussion of

how men live and die is a theological, moral, and religious discussion, regardless of phraseology. If it seems to other readers that a book on such a subject can be written only by experts in political science, politics, and history, we can only respond that in a democracy like ours it is still the civic responsibility of every man (once he has studied the issues and listened to the experts) to raise his voice so that his government cannot miss it.²¹

By making the point that the democratic, civic duty of every citizen to engage in social/governmental criticism extends to religious leaders, the same as any American, Heschel and his co-authors suggest that they understand their social criticism to be motivated both by their religious and political membership. For Heschel, this means referencing not only his duty to engage in social affairs as a Jew, but also his civic duty as a citizen of American democracy.

Interpretation

Whereas the application paradigm tends to construe the social criticism as drawing on only one tradition for inspiration, understanding, and articulation, and deemphasize the hermeneutic and dialogic nature of such statements, treating Heschel's statements as overlapping interpretations enables one not only to note the existence of such overlap, but also to identify its dynamics. Doing so, as I have been arguing throughout, has significant implications for conceptualizing the relationship between religion and democracy in the United States. First, this focus helps us to see that the overlap that Heschel identifies between the traditions of American democracy and his Jewish theology of pathos, grounded in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, centers around a set of importantly normative matters: a shared commitment to a humanistic axiology, characterized by its signature conception of the dignified human as a *person* (and not a thing) who is in relationship to the divine, an object of divine concern. Second, this overlap engages American democracy's psychological and doxastic dimensions: Heschel makes clear

²¹ Robert McAfee Brown, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Michael Novak *Vietnam: Crisis of Conscience* (New York: Association Press, 1967), 8.

that American democracy's endorsement of the political ideals of both freedom and equality brings with it an implicit requirement that Americans believe in the human value of their political compatriots, upon which this freedom and equality can be both grounded and made intelligible. Third, my approach makes clear the extent to which this overlap is hermeneutic and dialogic in nature: a full appreciation of the ways the tradition of the Hebrew prophets speaks to American democracy and American democracy speaks to it emerges only through an interpretation (such as Heschel's) of the status quo in American society as well as both religious and political traditions. On the topic at hand, Heschel's statements suggest that each relies on the others for elaboration in other terms. Because each of these points helps us to grasp the doxastic, dialogic, and hermeneutic dimensions of the relationship between religion and American democracy, these observations thus helps us to see the ways that American democracy's humanistic axiology and corresponding political ethic of belief function to facilitate equality and liberty amidst conditions of diversity by making possible a set of shared meanings which diverse Americans, such as Heschel, can make sense of in diverse terms.

Thus, I take for my point of departure not Heschel's legacies in the philosophy of religion, Jewish spirituality, or theology, but rather his legacy as a religious social critic and interpreter of American democracy and its ideals. To be sure, Heschel's analysis of and commentary on the pressing social issues of his day are found across the corpus of his writings, speeches, and interviews. Nevertheless, in many of the works in Jewish theology, spirituality, and philosophy of religion for which he is most famous, such socially-oriented statements and analyses do not feature prominently, if they appear in explicit form at all.²² While the ideas and arguments contained in these signature works certainly have social and political implications,

²² I take this to be the case of, for example, *God In Search of Man*, *Man Is Not Alone*, *Man's Quest for God*, and even *The Prophets*.

some of which I will discuss below, these texts do not contain Heschel's overlapping interpretations in American-democratic and Jewish-Hebraic terms. For this reason, I will not focus my analyses on them, but instead refer to them only to the extent that doing so proves helpful for unpacking and contextualizing Heschel's directly overlapping interpretations, which appear in his more directly socially and politically oriented writings and speeches.

Most of these publicly-oriented essays, speeches, and articles, are collected in *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (1967), which Heschel collected and published during his lifetime, and *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (1996), which was edited by his daughter, Susannah Heschel, and published twenty-five years after his death. Below I will examine the most direct references to American democracy's political ethic of belief that are found in these volumes. Making sense of these statements for the argument at hand will also require extended discussion of Heschel's Raymond Fred West Memorial Lectures at Stanford University, collected under the title *Who Is Man?* (1965), as well as some of the main features of Heschel's theology of pathos and philosophy of religion as they are found throughout his writings, especially in *Man is Not Alone* (1951) and *God In Search of Man* (1955). One cannot make sense of Heschel's references to American democracy's political ethic of belief without appreciating the ways both of these texts are meant both to diagnose and treat the "eclipse of humanity" that so concerns Heschel. As such, they provide essential context for the overlapping interpretations in question.

In what follows, I will advance the argument that Heschel simultaneously uses Jewish symbols as well as American-democratic symbols to interpret the meaning of key beliefs that he takes to be required by both the Jewish tradition and that of American democracy. I further argue that Heschel does so in a way that aims to raise Americans' consciousness to the self-conscious

possession and endorsement of a humanistic axiology that he believes is the inheritance of both of these traditions and also the only thing that will help American democracy face the challenges posed by the “eclipse of humanity.” Along the way, I will demonstrate how the example of Heschel’s social criticism meets the four hermeneutical criteria I outlined in Chapter 2: I will 1) demonstrate that Heschel’s overlapping interpretations respond to something akin to Dewey’s Eclipse of the Public, what Heschel calls the “eclipse of humanity,” 2) demonstrate that Heschel understands both the traditions of American democracy and Judaism to each involve an ethic of belief, 3) provide evidence that Heschel understands these ethics of belief to overlap on a certain humanistic axiology and thereby 4) make plain the hermeneutic and dialogic mediating function of both religious social critics, such as Heschel, and this humanistic axiology in a religiously plural, democratic society.

Heschel’s Consciousness-Raising Social Criticism

Heschel’s engagement as a social activist and critic became increasingly frequent and prominent over the course of the 1950s and especially so in the 1960s. As Kaplan writes of this period of Heschel’s life:

In 1951 Reinhold Niebuhr, America’s leading Protestant theologian, predicted that Heschel would “become a commanding and authoritative voice not only in the Jewish community but in the religious life of America.” By 1966 even popular magazines like *Newsweek* recognized that he had “built up a rich, contemporary Jewish theology that may well be the most significant achievement of modern Jewish thought.”²³

Indeed, Niebuhr’s words were extremely portentous. During the decade of the 1950s, Heschel published his most famous and influential works of theology and philosophy, including *The Sabbath* (a short reflection on the relevance of the Seventh Day in the context of modern life,

²³ Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical*, x.

1951), *Man Is Not Alone* (his philosophy of religion, 1951) and *God In Search of Man* (his philosophy of Judaism, 1955). While Heschel was never featured on the cover of *Time* magazine, like King and Murray, the publication of these texts, and in particular of *God in Search of Man*, earned Heschel a feature article in *Time* shortly thereafter, on March 19, 1956. These developments greatly expanded the reach of Heschel's ideas and raised his profile to a national level, a status that he actively embraced. As Kaplan notes it was at this point that:

The role of religion in public life became central to Heschel's reflections. After his *Time* magazine profile, Christians as well as Jews began to regard him as an authentic biblical voice for social change. He influenced these constituencies through essays and lecture tours; he also began to take part in national interfaith organizations such as the Religious Education Association (REA), whose annual conventions in Chicago attracted participants from all backgrounds. He adapted his message to different audiences, but always it focused on how authentic religion might transform every aspect of life.²⁴

The statements which I will consider below all come from this period following Heschel's profile in *Time*, a period of increasingly public, interfaith, and engaged social criticism, and a time when the United States was undergoing major technological and social changes. This period following the events of the Second World War saw American and American Jews dealing with the aftermath of the Holocaust, the increasing acceptance of Jews in white, middle-class American society, the suburbanization of America and its religious congregations, and eventually, the massive social upheaval that accompanied the Civil Rights Movement and the antiwar movements of the 1960s.

Heschel's Philosophy of Religion and Theology of Pathos

The turbulent post-war years saw Heschel offer the fullest articulation of his philosophy of religion and theology in the companion works, *Man is Not Alone* and *God in Search of Man*.

²⁴ Ibid., 179.

In *Man is Not Alone*, Heschel's basic claim is that man must not be understood in isolation—as if he is alone in the universe—but rather in relation to an “ineffable,” spiritual and/or divine dimension of existence, one which he experiences, particularly in moments of wonder and awe, has real knowledge of, and which effects both how man understands himself and how he ought to live.²⁵ In *God In Search of Man*, Heschel argues that any adequate understanding of the tradition of the Hebrew prophets—and thus Jewish theology—must involve the idea that the God of the Hebrew Bible is “in search of man,” that is to say, that God exhibits a self-imposed, passionate concern for mankind and man's fate. God needs man's devotion and righteous living. As Heschel clearly states the point: “The Bible is not a history of the Jewish people, but the story of God's quest of the righteous man.”²⁶

Heschel's work and method is informed by much of his own personal background, experiences growing up steeped in Hasidism as well as the rich culture of Eastern European Jewry before the Second World War, as well as his education in Warsaw and Berlin. Heschel was trained as an Orthodox Rabbi and spent most of his career in the United States in conversation with other representatives of Conservative and Orthodox Judaism. It is also worth noting that during his own lifetime, and since, Heschel's theology was very often criticized by his peers for being too unsystematic, insufficiently grounded in scripture or competent authorities, and overall too poetic. Indeed, it is at least in part for this reason that his faculty position at Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City was in “Jewish Mysticism.” Indeed, these features of Heschel's thought can, at times, make it difficult for the scholar to work with. However, they are also the features of his speeches and writings that often make them most

²⁵ Recognizing the gendered nature of “man,” I have followed Heschel's original use of this locution as a synecdoche for “human being” for sake of consistency with the titles of the two texts being discussed here.

²⁶ Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 245.

compelling to his various audiences. In both of these ways, Heschel's theology and philosophy of religion are uniquely his own, designed to help the reader or listener appreciate the insights that both the Hebrew prophets as well as broadly Hasidic and Eastern European spirituality has to offer modern America.

While the full breadth and depth of Heschel's philosophy of religion and theology remain beyond the scope of the current chapter, a brief discussion of their key features will prove illuminating for the current discussion of human being as "a category of value" for at least two reasons. First, Heschel is concerned with the matrix of the forces of modernity mentioned above for reasons that he suggests are fundamentally *theological*. Indeed, he suggests that the forces and the deficient anthropology that accompanies them have eclipsed insights that are central to the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, worrying that they are involved in the ongoing "process of eliminating the Bible from the consciousness of the Western world."²⁷ It is these Biblical insights Heschel spent his career as a theologian and social critic working to popularize, consistently working to revivify diverse Americans' consciousness of them. Although Heschel's effort to revivify this consciousness focuses on certain *anthropological* insights—identifying a misinterpretation of human being and offering a more adequate interpretation—these anthropological insights are informed by and involve an anthropology that is both religious and theological.

Second, Heschel's specific and crucial claim about human being as a "category of value," is connected to his theology of pathos. Heschel understands human beings' value to be necessarily connected to the possession of a self-understanding that imagines human existence in terms of human relation to a greater, transcendent, and divine context. He argues that human

²⁷ Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 236.

beings cannot adequately make sense their experiences of their own value—and thus themselves—without reference to God’s divine concern for them, because such experiences are simply a part of being human. Therefore, in order to fully trace the connections throughout his diagnoses of this eclipse as well as his efforts to move beyond it, a brief summary of the key elements of his theology of pathos proves instructive.

The insights at the heart of both Heschel’s philosophy of religion and his theology consist of a set of claims that, for the current propose, can be helpfully described as theological and epistemological. To start with the theological: Heschel’s key theological claims concerns what he calls God’s “pathos,” or God’s “divine concern” for all human beings. Heschel argues that the major insight to be gained from a study of the Hebrew prophets, such as he has engaged, is that God is not as the Greeks imagined, a dispassionate being, unconcerned with human beings or humanity welfare.²⁸ Rather, Heschel argues that the Hebrew prophets teach us that “God stands in a passionate relationship to man.”²⁹ He maintains that the prophets provide us evidence that God is intimately, and passionately concerned with human beings.

Heschel dedicates an entire section in *Man Is Not Alone* to this “Divine Concern,” which for our purposes provides a helpful summary of the key features of these points, and it is worth quoting at length. He writes that:

The God of the [Greek] philosophers is all indifference, too sublime to possess a heart or to cast a glance of our world. His wisdom consists in being conscious of Himself and oblivious to the world. In contrast the God of the prophets is all concern, too merciful to remain aloof to His creation. He not only rules the world in majesty of His might; He is personally concerned and even stirred by the conduct and fate of man. “His mercy is upon all His works” (Psalms 145:9).

These are the two poles of prophetic thinking: The idea that God is one, holy, different and apart from all that exists, and the idea of the inexhaustible concern of God

²⁸ Heschel also sees this what he calls this “Greek-German way of thinking” as present and popular in many of contemporary, Western society’s cultural assumptions. See Michael A. Chester, *Divine Pathos and Human Being: The Theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel* (London; Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2005), 119.

²⁹ Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 244.

for man, at times brightened by His mercy, at times darkened by His anger. He is both transcendent, beyond human understanding, and full of love, compassion, grief or anger.

God does not judge the deeds of man impassively, in a spirit of cool detachment. His judgment is imbued with a feeling of intimate concern. He is the father of all men, not only a judge; He is a lover engaged to His people, not only a king. God stands in a passionate relationship to man. His love or anger, His mercy or disappointment is an expression of His profound participation in this history of Israel and all men.

Prophecy, then, consists in the proclamation of the divine *pathos*, expressed in the language of the prophets as love, mercy or anger. Behind the various manifestations of his pathos is one motive, one need: The divine need for human righteousness.³⁰

Heschel argues that the prophets' expressions of love, mercy, and anger make clear that God feels something about human beings and for humanity. Each of the prophets' emotions provides us evidence God is concerned about human beings. In fact, as this passage makes clear, Heschel believes that the prophets suggest that God is supremely concerned with not only the happenings and welfare of the people of Israel but also that of all human beings', and in particular, the way that they respond to God's concern for them, their "righteousness."

Furthermore, Heschel suggests that prophetic religion is, in fact, defined by what human beings do in response to God's pathetic concern:

Pathos in all its forms reveals the extreme pertinence of man to God, His world-directness, attentiveness, and concern. God "looks at" the world and is affected by what happens in it; man is the object of his care and judgment.

The basic feature of pathos and the primary content of the prophets' consciousness is a *divine concern and attentiveness*...

This, then, is the ultimate category of prophetic theology: involvement, attentiveness, concern. Prophetic religion may be defined, not as what man does with his ultimate concern, but rather *what man does with God's concern*.³¹

This claim regarding God's divine concern represents the central insight of Heschel's theology, which Heschel identified in his doctoral dissertation on "The Prophetic Consciousness" in Berlin and returned to as a touchstone throughout his career. After publishing *Man Is Not Alone* and *God In Search of Man* over the course of the 1950s, Heschel returned to these ideas and his

³⁰ Ibid., 244-245.

³¹ Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001) 618-619.

dissertation, editing and expanding it for publication in 1962 as his famous work, *The Prophets*. This central insight about divine pathos has a number of implications in Heschel's theology.

However, in order specifically to trace the connections between Heschel's theology of pathos and his endorsement of American democracy's humanistic axiology in this chapter, I will focus on just one of these implications of Heschel's theology: what Heschel calls the "anthropological significance" of this divine pathos.³² For Heschel, this term refers to the aspect of Heschel's theology of pathos that suggests that human beings and human experience can only be fully made sense of in transcendent terms, in terms of their relation to a God who is concerned about them. Heschel's basic point may be summarized as follows: because human beings are the kind of creature about whom God is, in fact, concerned, human beings cannot fully understand themselves without appreciating their relation to this transcendent and divine context of concern.

Even more important, Heschel suggests that one key aspect of this relationality is that it is *axiological*. Heschel explicitly connects God's pathos to their human value:

The idea of divine pathos has also anthropological significance. It is man's being relevant to God. To the biblical mind the denial of man's relevance to God is as inconceivable as the denial of God's relevance to man. This principle leads to the basic affirmation of God's participation in human history, to the certainty that the events in the world concern Him and arouse His reaction. It finds its deepest expression in the fact that God can actually suffer. At the heart of the prophetic affirmation is the certainty that God is concerned about the world.

Beyond these implications for the meaning of history and human deeds, the idea of pathos reflects a high estimation of human nature. The *consciousness of the high dignity and sanctity of man*, his soul and body alike, accounts for the extreme development of anthropomorphic views in Jewish and Christian tradition, as the rejection of such consciousness played a part in the radical opposition to anthropomorphism.³³

As is clear, Heschel believes that the concept of divine pathos implies "the consciousness of the high dignity and sanctity of man." In specifying this point, Heschel makes plain that a theology

³² Ibid., 333-334.

³³ Ibid., emphasis added.

of pathos involves a humanistic axiology: An understanding of human beings in terms of their relationship to the God who is concerned about them fundamentally involves a claim about the value of human beings. Moreover, an *awareness* of God's concern for us affects how we understand ourselves, and in particular our own dignity, worth, and value. Not only do human beings have to make sense of themselves in terms of this transcendent/divine context, but to do so, necessarily involves both a certain kind of consciousness/awareness that is involved in making sense of their own value and worth.

Moreover, the humanistic axiology implied by Heschel's theology of pathos is central to his project of social criticism. It is this humanistic axiology that he suggests overlaps with that of American democracy, and it is central to the understanding of human being which Heschel believes it is necessary to revivify in the face of the forces of modernity which have eclipsed it. As he warns his audience, their beliefs about God, God's concern for humanity, and their faith and reverence as a response to this concern, matters for the value we accord ourselves and other human beings: "The future of the human species depends on our degree of reverence for the individual man. And the strength and validity of that reverence depend upon our faith in God's concern for man."³⁴

Let us return to the second set of claims that are involved in Heschel's theology of pathos: the epistemological. Put simply, they are that God's divine concern is something we all can and do experience, and we do so fundamentally through our experiences of the "ineffable." Heschel argues that we come to know about God's divine concern (among other things, including faith in God itself) through our experience of something he calls the "ineffable." This is a crucial part of Heschel's philosophy of religion and theology, even if it is sometimes

³⁴ Heschel, *Insecurity of Freedom*, 161.

obscure. Heschel uses the term “ineffable” to designate some form of apprehension of a dimension of existence for which our words simply fail us because its meaning extends beyond our ability to capture it conceptually or linguistically. At certain times and in certain places, says Heschel, we sense or intimate “the ineffable” when we become “stunned by that which cannot be put into words.”³⁵ When this happens, we perceive a meaning beyond which we have a capacity to express. This, in turn, results in “our sense of the ineffable...[which] is an awareness of an allusiveness to meaning without the ability to express it.”³⁶ And because of the combination of our ability to perceive this meaning with the simultaneous inability to express it, “the inner response it evokes is that of awe or reverence.”³⁷

The meaning that evokes this reverential response because it cannot be put into words and that all humans are equipped to grasp, according to Heschel, is evoked by an encounter with or experience of “the holy dimension of existence.”³⁸ As he writes:

What gives rise to faith is not a sentiment, a state of mind, an aspiration, but an everlasting fact in the universe, something which is prior to and independent of human knowledge and experience—the *holy dimension* of all existence. The objective side of religion is the spiritual constitution of the universe, the divine values invested in every being and exposed to the mind and will of man; an ontological relation. This is why the objective or the divine side of religion eludes psychological and sociological analysis...

...All existence stands in the dimension of the holy and nothing can be conceived of as living outside of it. All existence stands before God—here and everywhere, not and at all times. Not only a vow or conversion, not only the focusing of the mind upon God, engages man to Him; all deeds, thoughts, feelings and events are His concern.

Just as man lives in the realm of nature and is subject to its laws, so does he find himself in the holy dimension. He can escape its bounds as little as he can take leave of nature. He can sever himself from the dimension of the holy neither by sin nor stupidity, neither by apostasy nor by ignorance. There is no escape from God.³⁹

³⁵ Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁷ *Ibid.*.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 237-238.

As the above passage makes clear, our encounter with this “holy” dimension of existence not only evokes in human beings a sense of the “ineffable,” or evokes our faith and/or reverence.

This encounter also exposes to our minds and wills the value invested in us by the divine.

Heschel suggests that it is through such experiences of the “ineffable” that we acquire a consciousness of God’s divine concern for us and also that these experiences are the foundation of religion itself. He maintains that:

the root of religion is the question what to do with the feeling for the mystery of living, what to do with awe, wonder or fear. Religion, the end of isolation, begins with a consciousness that something is asked of us.... Wonder is the state of our being asked. The ineffable is a question addressed to us. All that is left to us is a choice—to answer or to refuse to answer.⁴⁰

In this way, Heschel argues that our experiences of the “ineffable” are experiences of God’s divine concern for us and that we experience it not only as a meaning that surpasses our ability to put it into words, but also as a question addressed to us, as something that exceeds us and invites our response.

As such, our knowledge of God is not speculative for Heschel; it is of a different kind than that at which Western philosophy traditionally aims. As Heschel puts the distinction:

“Philosophy begins with man’s question; *religion begins with God’s question and man’s answer.*”⁴¹ Heschel argues that the prophets help us to see the way that our knowledge of God is at once an experience of God’s divine concern for us: it is the experience of being possessed by and known to God:

To the philosopher God is an *object*, to men at prayer He is the *subject*. Their aim is not to possess Him as a concept of knowledge, to be informed about Him as if He were a fact among facts. What they crave for is to be wholly possessed by Him, to be an object of His knowledge and to sense it. The task is not to know the unknown but to be penetrated with it; *not to know* but *to be known* to Him, to expose ourselves to Him rather than Him to us; not to judge and to assert but to listen and to be judged by Him.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 69.

⁴¹ Ibid., 76.

His knowledge of man precedes man's knowledge of Him, while man's knowledge of Him comprehends only what God asks of man. This is the essential content of prophetic revelation."⁴²

In this way, Heschel draws on his theology of pathos and prophetic revelation to offer an alternative picture of what it means to "know" or have "knowledge" of God, one that is grounded in our experiences of a holy dimension of existence that communicate to us ineffable meaning that exceed our ability to express it. He argues that in these ways, God's concern is something we all can, and do, experience if we open ourselves up to our experiences of the ineffable. It is not only God's concern for us that we experience when we experience the ineffable, but it is also in an important sense our own value and worth.

It is precisely this sense of human value and worth that Heschel is worried has been eclipsed in the 20th century. Indeed, with these core pieces of Heschel's theology of pathos and philosophy of religion in view, we are now in a better position to turn to the misinterpretation of humanity which Heschel's aims to critique, and the reinterpretation of humanity which he engages in, at least in part, by drawing on these theological insights.

An "Eclipse of Humanity"

Heschel warned his audience in a 1967 lecture at a meeting of interfaith leaders in Toronto entitled, "The God of Israel and Christian Renewal," that "the overriding issue of this hour and the world and Western civilization is the *humanity of man*. Man is losing his true image and shaping his life in the image of anti-man."⁴³ Across the arc of his writing and speaking, Heschel makes clear that this state of affairs is the result of historical forces which he refers to as the "eclipse of humanity." Heschel uses this umbrella term, which appears in a small section of

⁴² Ibid., 128-129.

⁴³ Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 275.

Who Is Man?, to refer to the problematic misinterpretation of what it means to be human and an accompanying matrix of forces and that he hopes to identify and correct.

These forces of eclipse are many and diverse, and Heschel is neither particularly clear nor consistent across his writings and speeches regarding which specific forces of modern, Western civilization he has in mind. However, it is clear that Heschel does have in mind many of the major economic, technological, and geopolitical developments of the twentieth century. At minimum, Heschel suggests that these forces include the rapid pace and unbridled development of new technologies, the rise of fascist and totalitarian governments and ideologies (Heschel's response to the Holocaust), racism (Heschel's writings and activism regarding civil rights), militarism (Heschel's writings and activism in response to the war in Vietnam), capitalism and consumer culture, as well as scientific, logical, behavioral, sociological, and psychological positivism (*Who Is Man?*). Heschel himself characterizes this historical period as one of multiple simultaneous revolutions, writing in a short, 1964 essay on "The Moral Dilemma of the Space Age" that:

We live in a time when we are going through several revolutions simultaneously: political, social, scientific, technological, and spatial. This has never happened in history before. But we must exert the spiritual will to focus the attention of our minds and hearts on the problems we face. We cannot avoid them by reaching for the moon or grasping for life elsewhere. We must turn our efforts to rediscovering the true value and dignity of man, what man's life means as a totality in its great dimensions, his great potential for the creative arts, for the advancement of science in the search for peace and understanding, for acts of charity.⁴⁴

Heschel suggests that the connecting thread between the above ideologies as well as each of these "revolutions" is the fact that each involve aspects that assume, embody and/or advance an understanding of the human being as characterized by "expediency": one that

⁴⁴ Ibid., *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 218.

understands human beings' primary purpose to be satisfying their own needs and desires and understands the world and its resources as a means to do so.

Most succinctly stated, the term "eclipse of humanity" denotes the dominance of this deficient anthropology in Americans' self-understanding over an individual and collective self-understanding of "human" as denoting a "category of value." Heschel argues that this preferable self-understanding is one that is specifically value based on human beings' dignity in their relation to the transcendent God: as a "disclosure of the divine," created in the likenesses of God, and who is an ongoing object of God's divine concern.⁴⁵ And as the passage above already suggests, Heschel believes that by raising Americans' consciousness to a better understanding of human being, one which can account for these spiritual and axiological realities, his social criticism will work toward bringing Western civilization, and American society in particular, out of this eclipse.⁴⁶

Before turning to a fuller discussion of that "humanity," a few words about the terminology of eclipse prove instructive. While there is no clear evidence that Heschel drew on the thought of John Dewey (or Walter Lippman, for that matter) when he writes of the "eclipse of humanity," the parallel language of eclipse is striking and evocative, and it is significant for this study. Indeed, I want to suggest that the usage is at least parallel, if not entirely synonymous in all of its details. I think that Heschel's claim about this near loss of a collective self-understanding based in an appreciation of the value of human beings can be helpfully unpacked by using Dewey's notion of a Public in Eclipse, as discussed in Chapter 1.

⁴⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Patient as a Person" in *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux: 1966), 25.

⁴⁶ For a fuller discussion of the "eclipse of humanity," see below section "An 'Eclipse of Humanity'".

Regarding Dewey's theory, recall that Dewey defines the Public as the type of association that emerges from the empirical reality of combined action, and which can become a truly democratic community when these relations become conscious: mediated by signs and symbols that attach individual wants and impulses to common meanings, thereby transforming them into desires and purposes that are shared. Further recall that an Eclipse of the Public describes situations in which forces impede such intelligent reflection on the consequences of combined action, thus impeding this democratic consciousness. While Dewey develops this theory with an eye to the Eclipse of the Public by the technological and industrial developments of the machine age, Heschel suggests that the "eclipse of humanity" is the result of the aforementioned, "expediency"-oriented philosophical, technological, and cultural forces of modernity.

The differences notwithstanding, Heschel suggests, in a very similar vein to Dewey, that the forces he has in mind impede the reflection that will create the individual and collective consciousness that can help us navigate the challenges of contemporary, Western civilization: a consciousness of the value of the human person. Consider Heschel's following statement about the ways that this eclipse has impeded the necessary collective consciousness:

The most radical question we face does not really concern God but man—has not man proved to be incompatible or incongruous with the civilization that has emerged? Contemporary consciousness has not come to terms with its own experience. Overwhelmed by the rapid advancement in technology, it has failed to develop an adequate anthropology, a way of ensuring the independence of the human being in the face of the forces hostile to it...Man is gradually losing his ability to be in charge of his own life. He is beginning to regard himself not only as a self-contradiction but as an impossibility...Too many events happening too rapidly bombard our consciousness too frequently for us to be able to ponder their significance. Contemporary experience is lacking in adequate corresponding reflection.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Ibid., 276.

Here Heschel suggests that he aims to diagnose and counteract an eclipse of those signs and symbols which enable Americans to engage in the kind of humanizing, and on Dewey's picture democratic, reflection that will enable them to meet the challenges that they face.

A Misinterpretation of Humanity

Heschel believes that the aforementioned forces of modernity have caused Americans to adopt a misinterpretation what it means to be human. Indeed, his social criticism is a *reinterpretation* of a problematic individual and collective self-understanding of human being which he sees operating across the technological and ideological forces of modernity he has in mind. This misinterpretation is what he refers to when he warns his audience that “a dreadful oblivion prevails in the world. The world has forgotten what it means to be human. The gap is widening, the abyss is within the self.”⁴⁸

In response to such a state of affairs, Heschel aims to identify these symbolic and spiritual forces, these flawed interpretations, which he sees as a root cause of the social evils in question and provide better symbols and ideas—a reinterpretation of what it means to be human. In this way, Heschel's hermeneutic project aims to identify and correct our individual and collective misinterpretations of the meaning of humanity. His main strategy is to use biblical and Jewish signs, symbols, and stories to affect this reinterpretation, but, as I noted above, he also draws on the American-democratic political tradition to do so.

Such a misinterpretation of human being is significant for two reasons according to Heschel. First, we must attend to the quality of our self-interpretation because we human beings are fundamentally interpretive creatures. Heschel argues that we human beings simply cannot be without a self-understanding, a theory of ourselves. As he puts the point in *Who Is Man?*:

⁴⁸ Ibid., 259.

Man is not free to choose whether or not he wants to attain knowledge about himself. He necessarily and under all circumstances possesses a degree of such knowledge, preconceptions, and standards of self-interpretation. The paradox is that man is an obscure text to himself. He knows something is meant by what he is, by what he does, but he remains perplexed when called upon to interpret his own being. It is not enough to read the syllables of a text written in a language which one does not understand, to observe and to recount man's external behavior, important and necessary as such an enterprise is. Man must also interpret them in terms larger than his inner life.

Here Heschel makes clear the hermeneutic task we all face is perhaps daunting; we are obscure texts to ourselves. Yet, he also insists that we should not be daunted by this feature of our human existence, because we will always have a self-interpretation. It is a human necessity.

This observation leads us to the second point: Heschel argues that the theory of ourselves that we use to interpret our being, our hermeneutics of being human, matters because it affects us. He writes: "Unlike a theory of things which seeks merely to know its subject, a theory of man shapes and affects its subject. Statements about man magnetize the inner space of man. We not only describe the "nature" of man, we fashion it. We become what we think of ourselves."⁴⁹ In this way, Heschel argues that it matters whether one has a better or worse interpretation of herself; those that fail to do justice to our human being make a material difference in the real world and the lives of real human beings. Therefore, it is worth the effort to find good terms to use for our self-interpretations. If we base our self-understandings on inhuman assumptions, concepts, metaphors, and/or ideas, we quickly become less than human ourselves. As I noted above, Heschel doesn't think that human beings can fully understand themselves without some awareness of God's concern for them and its implications. It is these symbols in particular which Heschel brings to bear on the American self-understanding.

In fact, Heschel argues that the misunderstanding and oversimplification he decries is a widespread phenomenon in Americans' social imaginaries of his day, and thus that his

⁴⁹ Heschel, *Who Is Man?*, 7, 11.

contemporary Americans face disastrous human consequences. This is why Heschel repeatedly bemoans such “self-profanation” and “oversimplification.” Take for example, this statement:

I do not believe that repression is America’s major problem, as some writers maintain. America’s problem number one is the *self-profanation of man*, the perversion of eighteenth century conception of the pursuit of happiness, the *loss of reverence*, the *liquidation of enthusiasm* for the attainment of transcendent goals. Our conception of happiness is based on an oversimplification of man.⁵⁰

Or, as he puts it elsewhere: “America’s problem number one is...the promotion of spiritual homicide, the systematic liquidation of man as a person.”⁵¹ For Heschel, problematic conceptions of human beings (and by extension ourselves) results directly in actual dehumanization of actual human beings in the world. Americans’ humanity is in eclipse.

Heschel refers to this misunderstanding or misinterpretation of what it means to be human using multiple metaphors across the arc of his speeches and writings. He alternatively decries imaginings of human beings in the image of nature, in the image of a machine, in the image of an animal, and as a thing, or a fact. The nuances of these different images remain beyond the scope of the current analysis. It is sufficient to note that, as I suggested at the above, the common thread among these forces is that each assumes, embodies and/or advances an understanding of the human being characterized by expediency: one that understands human beings’ primary purpose to be satisfying their own needs and desires and understands the world and its resources as a means to do so. As Heschel poetically puts the point:

Needs are looked upon today as if they were holy, as if they contained the quintessence of eternity. Needs are our gods and we toil and spare no effort to gratify them...an *egocentric* view of man and his needs as the measure of all values, with nothing to determine his way of living except his own needs, continues to be cherished.⁵²

⁵⁰ Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 30.

⁵¹ Heschel, *Insecurity of Freedom*, 27.

⁵² Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 186.

The problem Heschel identifies with this anthropology that accompanies and underlies these forces of modernity is the fact that that it ultimately leads one to ask how the world and the people in it can serve oneself, and thus tends toward instrumentation, exploitation, and dehumanization. He argues that it collapses human experience and existence into a single dimension in which the satisfaction of needs is paramount, and doing so, can justify all manner of inhuman arrangements.⁵³

As Shai Held notes, Heschel often uses the term “expediency” to refer to this deficient anthropology. Held argues that it is in fact the related “ethos of self-assertion” at which Heschel aims both his critique of modernity and his social activism. He writes that:

Heschel sought to present traditional Judaism (as he understood it) as an antidote to the manifold ills of modernity. A refugee much of whose world had been destroyed in the genocidal fires of Nazi Europe, Heschel never tired of pointing to the moral and spiritual obtuseness of modern man, and of insisting that the barbarisms of modernity could be brought to an end only by a process of radical moral and spiritual reawakening. As we have seen, Heschel sought not merely to argue for such an awakening, but more fundamentally to educe it, to remind his readers that buried deep within them was the possibility of a wholly different orientation to the world, one rooted in wonder and amazement rather than callousness and indifference.⁵⁴

Held addresses the way that Heschel’s theology contrasts the “way of expediency,” grounded in such a deficient anthropology and theology, with the “way of wonder,” wonder which is evoked in response to the “ineffable” and thus is grounded in an awareness of God’s divine pathos, as described above. This distinction helps us to see that Heschel thinks the problem with this limited anthropology is that it eclipses what Heschel takes to be a fundamental and universal dimension of human experience and existence: the holy dimension, experience of which gives

⁵³ Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, “The Problem of Needs,” 179-190.

⁵⁴ Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 229.

rise to the sense of the ineffable, and thus the very foundation of religion and cornerstone of our awareness of God's divine concern for us.

The commonality among these deficient pictures of human being is that they each fail to recognize human beings as an object of God's concern. Heschel makes this hermeneutic point clearly, and it is worth quoting him at length here:

I would say that the major religious problem today is the systematic liquidation of man's sensitivity to the challenge of God. Let me try to explain that. We cannot understand man on his own terms. Man is not to be understood in the image of nature, in the image of an animal, or in the image of a machine. He has to be understood in the terms of transcendence, and that transcendence is not a passive thing; it is a challenging transcendence. Man is always being challenged; a question is always being asked of him. The moment man disavows the living transcendence, he is contracted; he is reduced to a level on which his distinction as a human being gradually disappears. What makes a man human is his openness to transcendence, which lifts him to a level higher than himself. Overwhelmed by the power he has achieved, man now has the illusion of sovereignty; he has become blind to his own situation, and deaf to the question being asked of him.⁵⁵

Those who interpret human beings according to the image of nature, animal, and/or machine all reject the key insights offered of Heschel's theology of pathos: that humans are created in the image of God, and a constant object of divine concern—namely, that human being is valuable to God. Heschel believes this understanding of human beings eclipse the humanistic axiology that is at the heart of the tradition of the Hebrew prophets and the tradition of American democracy as well.

In this way, Heschel suggests that, by foreclosing this dimension of human experience, these forces make it difficult to recognize that human beings necessarily exist in relation to a spiritual dimension, one in which they are created and called to be in relationship to a transcendent God, and to value each other according to their value to God. Indeed, Heschel thinks that adopting such an attitude inhibits one's ability to understand myself and my existence

⁵⁵ Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 251.

in transcendent terms, and therefore makes it difficult to realize that other people as well as God may, in fact, make a claim on me: that I ought to *serve them, and Him*. For this reason, Heschel considers these forces of modernity to inhibit or eclipse not only any awareness of humans' need to understand themselves and the meaning of their existence in relationship to the transcendent God, but also eclipse the awareness of the value of the human person that flows from this relationship.

It is worth emphasizing that, for Heschel, such a misinterpretation that obscures this humanistic axiology necessarily leads to dehumanization. As Heschel puts the point: “the dynamics of our society, the cheapening and trivialization of existence, continues to corrode that belief. The uniqueness and sacred preciousness of man is being refuted with an almost cruel consistency....What is involved is dehumanization.”⁵⁶ It is for this reason that Heschel bemoans the rise of popular understandings of ourselves in which we have limited our understanding of what will fulfill us and make us happy to one dimension by rejecting the our necessary relation to the transcendent God (or even a transcendent dimension of existence) in favor of the immanent. We think of ourselves in oversimplified terms and, in so doing, Heschel warns, we dehumanize ourselves and each other.

A Reinterpretation of Humanity

In response to such misinterpretation, Heschel aims to revivify the awareness of an anthropology that is at the heart of both the tradition of the Hebrew prophets and the American democratic tradition. To be sure, Heschel's theological writings as well as all of his social

⁵⁶ Heschel, *Insecurity of Freedom*, 16-17.

criticism are intimately connected to this project of revivification. As Michael A. Chester notes, Heschel's anthropological concerns permeate much of his thought:

Heschel's first published work, a collection of poems in Yiddish, *Der Shem Hameforash: Mentsh* ('God's Ineffable Name: Man'), set the tone of religious humanism that is characteristic of all his writings. His understanding of what it means to be human is revealed in all his American books (*Man Is Not Alone*, *Man's Quest for God* and *God In Search of Man*). However, not until he was invited to give the 1963 Raymond Fred West Memorial Lectures at Stanford University (later published as *Who Is Man?*) did Heschel specifically set out his ideas on 'being human.'⁵⁷

As Chichester suggests, these anthropological concerns permeate his work done in the United States, throughout the 1950s and 1960s. It is the series of lectures published under the title *Who Is Man?* that most directly addresses the axiological dimensions of this project of social criticism. Even though this text is not where we find Heschel's overlapping interpretations, the analysis contained in it proves immensely useful for understanding those overlapping interpretations from Heschel's socially and politically oriented writings and speeches. Thus, it bears brief consideration.

Who Is Man? expressly aims to engage in the kind of reinterpretation discussed above, even if its method of doing is not one of overlapping interpretation. Heschel's analysis in this text remains squarely in the mode and language of philosophical analysis and the philosophy of religion. Indeed, Heschel adopts this approach in this text because he believes that much recent, Western philosophy has contributed understandings of human beings that have contributed to the eclipse of humanity described above, and he appears concerned to engage these traditions of thought in their native language.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, this fact should not obscure the work's nature as providing a necessary reinterpretation of humanity in response to its Eclipse.

⁵⁷ Chester, *Divine Pathos and Human Being*, 151.

⁵⁸ Lawrence Perlman argues that Heschel's response to the "eclipse of humanity" in *Who Is Man?* is most productively understood as a thinly veiled critique of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. See *The Eclipse of Humanity: Heschel's Critique of Heidegger* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2016).

The title drives this very point home. Heschel argues that his interlocutors' approach to defining what it is to be human is so fundamentally flawed that they fail to ask even the right question: They ask "*What is man?*," building into their analysis the reductive assumption that man is a material object, *a thing*, rather than asking the better question "*Who is man?*" which importantly assumes man's status as *a person*, a human being in relationship to other beings:

Even the form in which we ask the question about man is biased by our own conception of man as a thing. We ask: *What is man?* Yet the true question should be: *Who is man?* As a thing man is explicable; as a person is his both a mystery and a surprise. As a thing he is finite; as a person he is inexhaustible.

The popular definitions cited above offer an answer to the question "What is man?" in terms of his facticity, as a thing of space. The question "Who is man?" is a question of worth, a question of position and status within the order of beings.⁵⁹

Heschel does not deny that human beings are importantly material beings, existing in space. However, he argues that a myopic focus on this dimension of existence—a focus on the *being* at the expense of the *human* part of human being—leads us all to a self-understanding that is not fit for the kind of being we are.

Heschel identifies the basic cause of this confusion to be the attempt (by primarily philosophers and theologians, and most specifically in this text, the philosophy of Martin Heidegger) to derive the meaning of the category "human being" from the category "being." This, Heschel says, is a fool's errand for two reasons. First, human being is a fundamentally different kind of being than other kinds of being:

The decision to give priority to the question what is human about a human being is based upon the assumption that the category of human is not simply derived from the category of being. The attribute "human" in the term "human being" is not an accidental quality, added to the essence of his being. It is the essence. Human being demands being human. An analysis of the human situation discloses a number of essential modes of being human...⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Heschel, *Who Is Man?*, 28.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

We differ from other kinds of beings around us, and other kinds of being in the world (say the being of a plant, animal, or machine) according to our “essential modes” of *being human* (more on these modes of being human below).

Secondly, Heschel notes that our path to acquiring knowledge of the kind of being we are is different: it is not the understanding of another, but the understanding of a self. In the case of *human being*, is the human being herself is both the subject and object of interpretation. As Heschel points out:

Facts of personal existence are not merely given. They are given through self-comprehension, and self-comprehension is an interpretation, since every act of self-comprehension involves the application of value judgments, norms, and decisions, and is the result of a selective attentiveness, reflecting a particular perspective. Thus even the facts of my existence are disclosed to me by way of interpretation, the terms of which determine the mode of my living and self-understanding.⁶¹

For this reason, arriving at an understanding of “human being” cannot simply involve an analysis of “facts,” external to one’s own experience and existence. Rather, it necessarily involves introspection, reflection, and self-interpretation.

Human Being as a Category of Value

Heschel emphasizes the hermeneutic nature of arriving at an understanding of what it means to be human to demonstrate that, when we engage in such introspection and interpretation, we discover that our own human being is a value laden activity. As the above passage suggests, Heschel maintains that our interpretation of the facts necessarily involve various value judgments—even and especially when the fact in question is our own self. This observation leads Heschel to conclude that an adequate interpretation of humanity is one that necessarily involves a sensitivity to axiology, specifically a humanistic axiology. Consider these two statements:

⁶¹ Ibid., 11.

Human being is being *sui generis*. The only adequate way to grasp its meaning is to think of man in human terms. Human is more than a concept of fact; it is a category of value, of the highest of all values available to us.⁶²

Self-understanding can hardly be kept strictly within the limits of description of facts, since the self itself is a compound of facts and norms, of what *is* as well as the consciousness of what *ought* to be. The essence of being human is value, value involved in human being.⁶³

Thus, for Heschel, we bring to our understanding of our own existence not only an awareness of the way things are, but a keen sense of how things should be, even if they fall short of that standard. This “consciousness of what ought to be” is importantly grounded in our experience(s) of our own value, the highest of all values available to us. Recall that Heschel understands our experiences of our own value to be disclosures of the divine, specifically God’s concern for us and need of us. Indeed, in his discussion of this humanistic axiology, Heschel makes plain that a human being’s infinite worth is a function of their necessary relationship to the divine. Heschel writes:

It is beyond my power to assess the worth of all humanity. What would a Life Insurance Company charge for the insurance of the entire human race? Now it is just as staggering to ponder the worth of one human being.

In terms of statistics the individual man is an exceedingly insignificant specimen compared with the totality of the human species. So why should the life and dignity of an individual man be regarded as infinitely precious?

Because human being is not just being-around, being-here-too, a being to be assessed and classified in terms of quantity. Human being is a disclosure of the divine. The grandeur of human being is revealed in the power of being human.⁶⁴

As a disclosure of the divine, human beings experience themselves as “infinitely precious,” so much so that it is simply “staggering to ponder the worth of one human being.”

This point brings us back to Heschel’s overall project in *Who Is Man?* Heschel aims in this text to tease out the particular mode of life that is involved in *human* being, a person who is

⁶² Heschel, *Insecurity of Freedom*, 25.

⁶³ Heschel, *Who Is Man?*, 11-12.

⁶⁴ Heschel, *Insecurity of Freedom*, 25.

the object of God's creation and ongoing concern and thus a being of infinite worth. Heschel claims that the features of this mode of being "emerge as manifestly true when a person beings to ponder the latent substance of his self-understanding."⁶⁵ Indeed, Heschel believes that a grasp of what it means to be human is available to all of us who pause and adequately reflect on our own understanding of who we are and what our existence means. His explicit task in *Who Is Man?* is to encourage and induce such reflection.

Therefore, in *Who Is Man?* Heschel aims to reframe our self-understanding, at least in part, to become increasingly one that is aware of the axiological dimensions of our being. In order to do so, he outlines what he calls the essential "features" or "sensibilities" of being human. He describes this effort as:

an attempt to describe some modes of being human which every reader will recognize and accept as essential. They represent a requiredness rather than a fabrication of the mind; not postulates of morality but fundamentals of human existence. Failure in nurturing the essential sensibilities results in the decay of the humanity of the individual man.⁶⁶

Nowhere does Heschel suggest that these "modes of human being" are comprehensive or exhaustive of all that it means to be human. However, he does think that they are fundamental, common, and universal to our experiences of ourselves, and thus the human experience. Heschel hopes to articulate the contours of a shared, human self-understanding that is grounded in our nature as human beings, rather than being itself.

He identifies at least nine "features" or "modes" of *human* being: preciousness, uniqueness, nonfinality, a sequence of events, opportunity, solidarity, reciprocity, sanctity, and a concern for meaning.⁶⁷ Before sketching what Heschel means by each of these designations, one

⁶⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 35-80.

should note that Heschel begins this section of the *Who Is Man?* by noting that human morality is intimately connected to our understandings of ourselves the kind of creatures we are. He writes that:

The fundamental problem of ethics has been expressed as the question: What ought I do? The weakness of this formulation is in separating doing from the sheer being of the “I,” as if the ethical problem were a special and added aspect of a person’s existence. However, the moral issue is deeper and more intimately related to the self than doing. The very question: What ought I do? is a moral act. It is not a problem added to the self; it is the self as a problem.

The moral problem can be treated only as a personal problem: How should I live the life that I am. My life is the task, the problem, and the challenge.

The moral deed is important not only because the community, for example, needs it. It is important because without it there is no grasp of what is human about my being human.⁶⁸

Upon the kind of reflection Heschel has in mind, human selves confront ourselves as *a problem*, a challenge. He suggests that a key, fundamental experience of being human is the awareness of the self as a free being, with the power to act. We all, upon reflection, face the question, “How should I live the life that I am?” And it is this fundamental, existential and moral position that Heschel’s nine features of human being as a category of value describe.

First, Heschel maintains that human beings exhibit an awareness of the “preciousness” of their own existence. He writes that, “beyond all agony and anxiety lies the most important ingredients of self-reflection: the preciousness of my own existence. To my own heart my existence is unique, unprecedented, exceedingly precious, and I resist the thought of gambling away its meaning.”⁶⁹ My being here-and-now is important to me, and yours is important to you. Heschel understands human beings to hold dearly their own, unique existence.

Second, Heschel believes that human beings understand ourselves to be unique among the other creatures and objects in the universe in which we find ourselves. He notes that:

⁶⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 35.

It is the uniqueness of man that puzzles our mind. All other beings seem to fit perfectly into a natural order and are determined by permanent principles. Man alone occupies a unique status. As a natural being he is determined by natural laws. As a human being he must frequently choose; confined in his existence, he is unrestrained in his will. His acts do not emanate from him like rays of energy from matter. Placed in the parting of the ways, he must time and again decide which direction to take. The course of his life is, accordingly, unpredictable; no person can write his autobiography in advance.⁷⁰

In a world of fixed and perfectly regular physical laws, we experience ourselves as something of an anomaly: we can choose how to act. Thus, “human being is a novelty.”⁷¹ Every human being has something to say, to think, or to do which is unprecedented...A person has the capacity to create events.”⁷² Experiencing the freedom of our human will gives rise to this sense that each of us is a unique, creative force in the universe.

Our uniqueness leads to the third feature: we experience our own human being not as a substance but as a sequence of events, some of which we create. As Heschel warns:

In the awareness of my personhood I do not come upon sheer consciousness or a block of reality called the self, but upon the power to create events. Being human is not a thing, a substance; it is a moment that happens; not a process but a sequence of acts or events. The self that I am, the self that I come upon, has the ability to combine a variety of functions and intentions in order to bring about a result, the meaning or value of which transcends my own existence.⁷³

Part of our self-understanding is the power to create events or sequences of events whose meaning extends beyond their meaning for ourselves.

Fourth, aware of herself as a creative force and a sequence of events, a human being is also aware of her own “nonfinality.” Because a person is a creative force in the universe, who can choose and act according to her unrestrained will, “The being of a person is never completed, final. The status of a person is a *status nascendi*. The choice is made moment by moment. There

⁷⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁷¹ Ibid., 37.

⁷² Ibid., 37.

⁷³ Ibid., 42.

is no standing still.” Rather than a being fact, being a human is “a goal and achievement.”⁷⁴ It is not a predetermined or fixed state of affairs, but an end which one must constantly pursue.

Fifth, due our experience of our own uniqueness, ability to create events, and nonfinality, we experience human being as an “opportunity.” By this designation, Heschel means that we understand ourselves not to be reducible to any set of predetermined characteristics, or even “the facts” regarding ourselves as they stand at any given moment. Rather, a human being understands himself according to “the possibilities of his being over the actuality of his being.” This means that, “to understand the problem of man in human terms we must not conceive of him in terms of physics, as a thing in which energy is stored away in some latent manner, but rather in categories of personal thinking and personal experience as a person who is called upon [by God] to be more than what he is.”⁷⁵ As a unique and creative force in the universe, human beings experience themselves to be creatures who can act according to new possibilities, including those that they create, and who can do so in response to God’s divine concern.

Sixth, Heschel argues that an essential feature of the self-understanding of a human being is that she exists in “solidarity” with other human beings, by which Heschel means to denote that humans are fundamentally social beings. While he readily recognizes the importance of self-sufficiency and independence in the lives of individual humans, Heschel urges his readers to recognize the reality that “man is never alone. It is together with all my contemporaries that I live, suffer, and rejoice, even while living in isolation.”⁷⁶ Indeed, Heschel maintains that is it internal to the experience of human being to be one human among many. As he puts it: “Man in his being is derived from, attended by, and directed to the being of community. For man *to be*

⁷⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 44.

means *to be with* other human beings. His existence *is* coexistence. He can never attain fulfillment, or sense meaning, unless it is shared, unless it pertains to other human beings.”⁷⁷

Seventh, due to our existence in solidarity with other human beings, the self-understanding of human beings is fundamentally informed by our inescapable experiences of reciprocity. In Heschel’s words: “To be a person is to reciprocate, to offer in return for what one receives...I become a person by knowing the meaning of receiving and giving. I become a person when I begin to reciprocate.”⁷⁸ Experiences of giving and receiving, of expressing appreciation, and of being sensitive to other’s needs, their suffering, their situation are fundamental to what it means to be human.

Eighth, Heschel maintains that “being human involves being sensitive to the sacred.” Heschel’s use of this term is unclear at best. However, he is clear that this sensitivity entails both recognizing the “underived insight” of the sanctity of human life, as well as acknowledging “that certain things are not available to us, not at our disposal.”⁷⁹ Heschel suggests that the human awareness of both of these realities flows from a sensitivity to that which is dear to God. Thus, a sensitivity to the sacred appears to involve some appreciation for “the holy dimension of existence” as well as the “ineffable” meaning that arises in encounters with it, and the key implication from this that human beings ought to act some ways and not others.

Ninth, and finally, Heschel argues that being human involves care and concern for meaning. Heschel writes that:

Human being is never sheer being; it is always involved in meaning. The dimension of meaning is as indigenous to his being human as the dimension of space is to stars and stones. Just as man occupies a position in space, so has he a status in what may be called

⁷⁷ Ibid., 45.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 48.

metaphorically a dimension of meaning....The concern for meaning, the gist of all creative efforts, is not self-imposed; it is a necessity of his being.⁸⁰

This feature of human being is based upon Heschel's assertion that the "paramount problem" of human existence is a search for what he calls "significant being."⁸¹ To put it simply, Heschel takes it to be a straightforward and simple fact that we want to know what our own existence means, and namely that it means something rather than nothing—that it is not meaningless. He asserts that human beings simply are the kind of being who asks about the meaning of their own existence, and that this is an experience we all share. Such experiences mean that the self-understanding of human beings necessarily involves "an effort to understand the self (as well as humanity) in terms larger than the self," and to interpret the self not simply in terms of being, but in terms of the meaning of being.⁸² "This, indeed, is the essential paradox...Human being without an inkling of a relevance surpassing it is devoid of sense. The self is in need of a meaning which it cannot furnish itself."⁸³

As this passage already suggests, there is one further and hugely important implication of this last "feature" of being human. This necessary, human concern for meaning is particularly significant because it suggests that a corollary sensibility of human being is the need for and openness to transcendence in human life. As Heschel puts the point:

The secret of being human is care for meaning. Man is not his own meaning, and if the essence of being human is concern for transcendent meaning, then man's secret lies in openness to transcendence. Existence is interspersed with suggestions of transcendence, and openness to transcendence is a constitutive element of being human.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Ibid., 51.

⁸¹ Ibid., 51.

⁸² Ibid., 52.

⁸³ Ibid., 56.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 66.

Here he stresses that, as humans tries to make sense of themselves, and they find themselves necessarily needing to make recourse to transcendent terms to do so. However, this effort poses a certain problem to human capacities, Heschel warns, because “it is beyond the power of the mind to prove that being human is a fact of undeniable validity. Man cannot verify his humanity in terms that would transcend his existence. Indeed, being human can only be grasped in human terms, and its validity remains contingent upon the validity of human terms. Man cannot prove transcendent meaning; he is a manifestation of transcendent meaning.”⁸⁵ Therefore, Heschel advises against a focus on human *being* and recommends that we focus our attention on human *living*, which emphasizes not a person’s existence, but their self as a free and responsible being imagined according to the nine “features” above and who is always at a “crossroads” deciding which direction to take.⁸⁶

Heschel suggests that doing so enables us to ask a different question about human living, namely: “What is the context to which we must relate the *living* man?” Whereas those focused on ontology seek to relate the human being to “a transcendence called being as such,” Heschel argues that those focused on the Bible seek “to relate man to divine living, to a transcendence called the living God.”⁸⁷ This distinction is the linchpin in the reinterpretation of human being that Heschel hopes to offer contemporary Western civilization. While the need to relate human being to a transcendent context is a perennial feature of being human, the only kind of transcendence that is sufficient to the task of helping a *living* being make sense of herself is the transcendence of another *living being*. For Heschel, there is a part of human being that can only be understood in terms of human being’s relationship to the transcendent God. It is this insight that Heschel

⁸⁵ Ibid., 65.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 68.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 69.

firmly believes the biblical tradition and the tradition of the Hebrew prophets has to offer modern understandings of human being. It is the insight that is at the core of his entire theology of pathos: that God *needs* human beings, that God is in search of man.

Indeed, Heschel suggests that the key to all of these “features,” and the basic is characteristic of human being is her value to a transcendent God. He claims that “the primary topic...of biblical thinking is not man’s knowledge of God but rather man’s being known by God, man’s being an object of divine knowledge and concern.”⁸⁸ This insight is what the Hebrew bible offers contemporary civilization; the Hebrews recognized that humanity’s search for meaning was at once God’s concern for man, a concern and a challenge to which we respond:

the Hebrews formulated the search of meaning as God’s thought (or concern) in search of man. The meaning of existence is not naturally given; it is not an endowment but an art. It rather depends on whether we respond or refuse to respond to God who is in search of man; it is either fulfilled or missed.

Man’s anxiety about meaning is not a question, an impulse, but an answer, a response to a challenge.”⁸⁹

Thus, Heschel argues that human beings’ concern for meaning is, in fact, more evidence of the fact that a transcendent God needs them. It is evidence of God’s divine pathos. He writes that, “man is in need of meaning, but if ultimate meaning is not in need of man, and he cannot relate himself to it, then ultimate meaning is meaningless to him.”⁹⁰ He goes on to note that human beings’ “personal needs come and go, but one anxiety remains: Am I needed? There is no human being who has not been moved by that anxiety. It is a most significant fact that man is not sufficient to himself, that life is not meaningful to him unless it is serving an end beyond itself, unless it is of value to someone else.”⁹¹ To be able to understand and appreciate human being as

⁸⁸ Heschel, *Who Is Man?*, 74.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

a category of value, Heschel says that we need to grasp the point that human beings need to be valuable to someone. For Heschel, that someone is the living God.

Now we are in a position to see how the theology discussed above informs Heschel's axiology and how it connects to the "eclipse of humanity." Heschel believes that by drawing attention to both the dimensions of human existence (e.g. our experiences of the "ineffable") and the dimensions of human self-understanding (e.g. the "features" of being human) that themselves suggest that human being is a "category of value" we may also come to see that this value is connected to God's divine pathos, or at the very least an awareness that humans stand in some necessary relation to "the holy dimension of existence."

This point returns us to the "eclipse of humanity" which Heschel's reinterpretation of human being as a category of value is designed to overcome. We are now also in a position to better appreciate the full extent of what Heschel means when he expresses his deep concern about what he describes as an ongoing process of "eliminating the Bible from the consciousness of the Western world."⁹² The Biblical insight that Heschel fears has been eliminated is that human beings were not only created in the image and likeness of God, but also remain a constant object of divine concern.⁹³ Heschel is worried that we have forgotten a central lesson that any study of the Hebrew Prophets reveals: not only that God created us, but that God created us because he needs, and continues to need, us. We are and continue to be valuable to him; human being is a category of value.

In the course of his social criticism, Heschel works to raise Americans' consciousness to this particular axiology as well as its connections to both the tradition of the Hebrew Prophets

⁹² Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 236.

⁹³ This point is the linchpin of all of Heschel's pathetic theology (theology of pathos) and especially crucial to his arguments in *Man is Not Alone* and *Who Is Man?*.

and that of American democracy. In doing so, he offers overlapping interpretations of both traditions' ethics of belief, interpretations to which I now turn.

Heschel's Overlapping Interpretations

Heschel brings this interpretation of human being to bear on the various problems facing American society in the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, much of his political and social criticism can be understood as a concerted effort to identify instances where this humanistic axiology is being denied, to work to correct those wrongs, and more broadly, to raise the consciousness of diverse Americans to the value of human persons and the social and political policies that will support it. As I have been suggesting throughout, Heschel appeals not only to Biblical and Jewish terms to affect this reinterpretation in light of America's pressing problems, he also does so by appealing to American democratic signs and symbols, and specifically, American democracy's political ethic of belief.

While Heschel's explicitly American-democratic symbolism is the least pronounced of the figures considered in this study, it is also perhaps the most focused. Indeed, Heschel's references to the beliefs that Americans share and/or that American democracy requires take two basic forms: he refers to 1) a belief that all men are created equal, echoing the language of the Declaration of Independence, and, with a few variations in phrasing, 2) a belief in the sanctity of human life. He makes these references in speeches that span the years 1958-1965 in which he speaks on a number of social and political issues, namely: America's youth, America's elderly, as well as race relations and the Civil Rights Movement. In each case, Heschel's social and political statements engage in precisely the kind of reinterpretation described above. He aims to revivify an awareness of a humanistic axiology which he finds not only to flow directly from the

Jewish and biblical tradition of the Hebrew prophets, but also the tradition of American democracy. Unsurprisingly then, we find him appealing to the overlap in these traditions to do so. In each case, he hopes that raising awareness of human being as a category of value will encourage and enable Americans to treat the humanity of their compatriots with greater reverence.

“Children and Youth” (1960)

We find the clearest illustration of all the key constituent elements and dynamics of Heschel’s overlapping interpretations in his 1960 speech on “Children and Youth,” delivered at the White House’ for the president’s “Conference on Children and Youth” that year. Heschel identifies the “problem of our youth” to be the very “spirit of our age,” that he discusses in *Who Is Man?*. He argues that we are in the process of instilling in our youth a understanding of human beings and the world that instrumentalizes the world, human beings, and all values—a misinterpretation of humanity.⁹⁴ This way of looking at things teaches children to value the world and each other only according to its utility for enhancing humans power, says Heschel.⁹⁵ Namely, it teaches them “the myth that accumulation of wealth and the achievement of comfort are the chief vocations of man.”⁹⁶

In encouraging our youth to view and inhabit the world this way, Heschel warns that we are not only “reducing the status of man from that of a *person* to that of a *thing*,” but also that “we have locked ourselves out of the world by regarding it only as material for the gratification of our desires.”⁹⁷ Heschel argues that the direct consequence of this situation is that we fail to

⁹⁴ Heschel, *Insecurity of Freedom*, 40.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

provide youth with what they desperately need: “a sense of significant being, a sense of reverence for the society to which we all belong.”⁹⁸ Therefore, he maintains that the major challenge that he and his audience face is how to teach and instill in children such a sense of reverence. He states in no uncertain terms that “it is our supreme educational duty to enable the child to revere.”⁹⁹

In order to teach a child such reverence, Heschel maintains that “we must learn how to activate the soul, how to answer the ultimate, how to relate ourselves to the spirit.”¹⁰⁰ Therefore, Heschel concludes his admonitions by advocating for an adjustment of educational standards to what I have been calling human being as a category of value, or this “enhanced conception of man.” He advises his audience:

We will have to adjust our educational standards to an enhanced conception of man; to rise to an understanding of values compatible with the grandeur of man and compatible with the challenge and danger of our age; to endeavor to develop an aptitude and personal responsibility in every student for the preservation of the humanistic tradition of the West, a reverence for what man has thought concerning universality, justice, and compassion; that right living consists not only in the satisfaction of personal needs, but also in responding to moral and spiritual demands.¹⁰¹

Doing so, he thinks, will help encourage students to develop this sense of reverence for human beings and thus enhance their ability to live a life that is worthy of and consonant with their own nature as a human being. In short, it will help them to revere the world, God, and each other.

Important for the argument at hand is the fact that, in the process of bringing this humanistic axiology to bear on the situation of American youth in 1960, Heschel appeals to American democracy’s political ethic of belief. Specifically, Heschel appeals to what he characterizes as the shared, American-democratic belief in the “sanctity of human life.” He does

⁹⁸ Ibid., 39.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 46.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 50.

so in order to relate these American-democratic beliefs to the insights offered by his Jewish and prophetic theology of pathos. This passage is significant and worth quoting at length:

One of the supreme principles which we all regard as essential to American democracy is the *sanctity of human life*. However, the regard for the sanctity of human life is contingent upon the *sanctity of human living*. If the ways of living become perverted, the idea of the sanctity of life is in danger of becoming meaningless.

An essential attribute of sanctity is transcendence. Sanctity points to something greater from itself. What it stands for is more than I am able to imagine or to appreciate. A sacred object is perceptible, but not completely available. It is in our custody, but not at our disposal. We may enjoy it; we must neither abuse nor consume it. Such is life, both my own and the life of my fellow man. I can only have regard for the sanctity of others if I insist upon cultivating sanctity in my own living.

Sanctity of life means that man is a partner, not a sovereign, that life is a trust, not a property. To exist as a human is to assist the divine. It means to be a witness to the holy, to give testimony to the grandeur of honesty, to the glory of righteousness, to the holiness of truth, to the marvel and mystery of being alive.¹⁰²

Here we observe Heschel directly appealing to the overlap between his understanding of American democracy's political ethic of belief and that of his Jewish theology of pathos. He argues not only that a shared, American-democratic belief in the "sanctity of human life" necessarily implies human beings' relationship to transcendence. He suggests that, set in conversation with the insights derived from the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, one sees that this doctrine of the American-democratic tradition necessarily, if implicitly, implies an understanding of human being as an object of divine concern and the human person as a partner of God.

In doing so, Heschel offers an intentionally overlapping interpretation of the humanistic axiology in American-democratic and Jewish-Hebraic terms. He aims to make plain that the humanistic axiology that encourages his audience to revivify, adopt, and help America's youth to internalize is an inheritance of both the American-democratic and Jewish traditions. In his effort

¹⁰² Ibid., 48-49.

to convince his audience of the need to reform the American educational system to teach American youth the kind of reverence he has in mind, Heschel trades in this humanistic overlap.

“To Grow In Wisdom” (1961)

While Heschel invokes American democracy’s political ethic of belief to argue for the necessity of teaching American youth reverence more generally, he also returns to American democracy’s political ethic of belief to make call all Americans to adjust our attitudes and concepts regarding aging so that we all may begin to revere the old. He does so upon his return to the White House the following year in his paper, “To Grow In Wisdom,” which he presented before the White House Conference on Aging in 1961. This context likely contributed to both the Heschel’s recourse to American democracy’s political ethic of belief and the relative lack of overt religious symbolism or imagery in the text. Nevertheless, a significant overlapping interpretation is to be found in it.

Heschel argues that there are two overarching problems in our society regarding old age: “the contempt for the old and the traumatic fear of getting old.”¹⁰³ He suggests that we can address these “twin phenomena” by adjusting our attitudes and concepts regarding old age and the process of aging from one of contempt and fear to become one of reverence for the elderly and aging. Heschel diagnoses three problems or “illnesses” that characterize experience of many elderly persons in America, namely: “(1) The sense of being useless to, and rejected by, family and society; (2) the sense of inner emptiness and boredom; (3) loneliness and the fear of time.”¹⁰⁴ In the course of his analysis, Heschel also offers “cures” to these three “ills,” the throughline of

¹⁰³ Ibid., 71.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 75.

which is a reorientation of American's understanding of the elderly and their human value according to the humanistic axiology described above.

Heschel directly invokes American democracy's political ethic of belief directly twice in this text: once near the beginning, and once at the very end. The first time appears during his indictment of the status quo regarding the elderly in American society. He appeals to the preamble of the Declaration of Independence, writing that, "We maintain that all men are created equal, including the old. What is extraordinary is that we feel called upon to plead for such equality, in contrast to other civilizations in which the superiority of the old is maintained."¹⁰⁵ Here, Heschel points out the irony inherent in the fact that Americans supposedly profess a belief in equality, yet have failed to treat the elderly as equally valuable as Americans of other ages.

The second reference comes at the very end of the text. Here he implores his audience to live up to the words of the Declaration of Independence:

We must seek ways to overcome the traumatic fear of being old, the prejudice, the discrimination against those advanced in years. All men are created equal, including those advanced in years. Being old is not the same as being stale. The effort to restore the dignity of old age will depend on our ability to revive the equation of old age and wisdom.¹⁰⁶

Heschel suggests that our efforts to solve the problem of discrimination against the elderly is, in fact, required by our political tradition. He invokes American democracy's political ethic of belief to emphasize that this tradition itself demands that we treat the elderly in a more dignified fashion, with dignity equal to that of all of their compatriots. In both cases, Heschel's invocation of American democracy's political ethic of belief draws attention to the fact that American society is falling short of the ideals of its democratic political tradition regarding the elderly.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 72.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 84.

Furthermore, juxtaposing these references to the Declaration of Independence and American democracy's political ethic of belief with the solutions he offers creates an interpretation of the social and spiritual situation of the American elderly in overlapping terms. This is because this solution—essentially adjusting our attitudes towards old age and the elderly to be informed by a picture of the human being as a category of value—invokes, though rather implicitly, Heschel's theology of pathos. Thus, a brief sketch of each of these problems and their corresponding solutions proves instructive on this point.

Heschel argues that the elderly face a 1) sense of feeling useless to and rejected by their families and society as well as 2) a sense of inner emptiness and boredom. He points out that this view is directly informed by the assumption taught to us by our "ideologies and institutions...that the worth of a person is equivalent to the usefulness to society." However, Heschel also warns that "human existence cannot derive its ultimate meaning from society, because society itself is in need of meaning."

Against this picture, Heschel advocates for a reorientation of our understanding of the elderly as human beings who are "significant and valuable" in themselves, who need to be needed, whose being is significant in light of their relationship to the transcendent God, of God's concern for them.¹⁰⁷ Regarding these first two points, Heschel does not invoke the language of God or divine concern directly. However, read in light of the above discussion of *Who Is Man?*, the allusions to the theological and anthropological insights of the tradition the Hebrew prophets become immediately apparent.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 75-78

¹⁰⁸ Heschel himself directs his reader to his arguments in *Who Is Man?* in a footnote in this section of the text on p. 78.

The third challenge facing the elderly in America, Heschel argues, is a feeling of loneliness and the fear of time. Here, too, Heschel seems to think the tradition of the Hebrew prophets will help reform Americans' understanding of the elderly to become that of a human being as a category of value. Indeed, to counteract this loneliness and anxiety, Heschel points out that, viewed through the insight of the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, the elderly have neither need to be alone nor afraid of time. He maintains that "time is man's most important frontier, the advance region of significant being, a region where man's true freedom lies." In addition to being where the elderly will achieve such a sense of significant being, even in their old age:

it is the dimension of time wherein man meets God, wherein man becomes aware that every instant is an act of creation, a Beginning, opening up new roads for ultimate realizations. *Time is the presence of God in the world of space*, and it is within time that we are able to sense the unity of all Beings.¹⁰⁹

In doing so, Heschel suggests that the dimension of time, viewed through the insights of the Biblical tradition, is the dimension in which the elderly are not alone, for it represents the presence of God.

Thus, in "To Grow in Wisdom," we observe Heschel once again appealing to American democracy's political ethic of belief as well as his understanding of Jewish theology in order to demonstrate that their humanistic axiologies overlap, and to use this overlap to advocate for the social change he desires to see. He suggests that they both demand a reorientation of the way Americans think about the elderly away from an understanding of their value according to the usefulness of society and toward human being as a category of value. In this attempt to raise his audience's awareness of this humanistic axiology and its place in both of these traditions, Heschel again engages in an overlapping interpretation.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 81.

“The White Man on Trial” (1964) and “Race and Religion” (1963)

Another of Heschel’s overlapping interpretations which invokes American democracy’s political ethic of belief appears in one of his most famous statements on religion, race, and the Civil Rights Movement: a paper he presented to the Metropolitan Conference on Religion and Race in 1964 entitled “The White Man on Trial.”¹¹⁰ In this address, Heschel offers an overlapping interpretation of the state of race relations in America in order to make another call for reverence, in this case for all Americans to adopt an increased reverence for the humanity Black Americans. I will focus my analysis where this symbolism and imagery overlaps with Heschel’s reference to American democracy’s political ethic of belief.

Heschel addresses the situation of White Americans at a very particular juncture: after the success of the Civil Rights campaigns of 1963. He argues that Americans—and specifically, but not only, White Americans—face a test to both their integrity and humanity following these events. The “trial” they face involves 1) continuing to change and improve the image of Black Americans in the minds of all Americans according to human being as a category of value, though especially White Americans, and 2) taking actions based on this newly dignified image of Black Americans. Both of these efforts, Heschel argues, are still necessary, and even more necessary after the events of that 1963:

No one who entered the year 1963 with uncertainty and appreciation could fail to sense that this was a great year in the spiritual history of man.

Who would have believed what we have seen? Who would have expected what we have witnessed? The overwhelming majority of the American people stood up and gave witness to the proposition that all men are created equal and accepted, without reservation, to bring about complete desegregation. A new image of the humanity of the Negro dominates the mind. This is a triumph of conscience!”

...The white man is on trial. Can we match the spiritual dignity of this great revolution with devotion and incessant activity? Shall the triumph of faith be defeated by

¹¹⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “White Man on Trial” in *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux: 1966), 101-111.

premature sense of accomplishment? We have achieved a consensus of conscience, we must now strive for incessant action.

In a word full of absurdity and repeated failures, the advancement in this cause was an outburst of righteousness, a veritable revelation of what is strong and good in our nation.¹¹¹

Furthermore, to establish these points rhetorically, Heschel relies on an extended biblical metaphor referencing the Exodus narrative that compares Black Americans to the ancient Israelites and White Americans to the ancient Egyptians and their Pharaoh, who held them in bondage. He uses this metaphor to articulate the stakes of his claim about the position in which both groups find themselves after the events of 1963:

The tragedy of Pharaoh [read: white leadership] was the failure to realize that the exodus from slavery could have spelled redemption for both Israel [read: blacks] and Egypt [whites]. Would that Pharaoh and the Egyptians [whites] had joined the Israelites [blacks] in the desert and stood together at the foot of Sinai!

The Negro problem adds a spiritual purpose to our lives as Americans: No person can be kept apart. All men are involved in the predicament of one man.¹¹²

Using this biblical metaphor, Heschel makes plain what he sees as the shared stakes of the situation of race relations in America: namely, that it offers both black and White Americans an opportunity (though not the same one) for a certain kind of redemption. And furthermore, Heschel's invocation of the Exodus metaphor in the above passages suggests that to accomplish this redemption, White Americans will have to travel the path alongside Black Americans to the promised land.

As this passage makes plain, Heschel is concerned to remind Americans, and especially White Americans, about this "spiritual" opportunity to learn to reimagine blacks Americans according to their human value, an opportunity he thinks has been largely missed. He warns that:

We are involved in a major legal and social revolution, but we fail to realize that we also face a spiritual emergency, the need for all of us to change our image of the Negro as well as the need of the Negro to enhance his own proper image. There is a disrespect for

¹¹¹ Ibid., 108.

¹¹² Ibid., 103-104.

the Negro in the hearts of many white people. It is a psychological law that people will only respect a person who has self-respect and entertain contempt for a person who has self-contempt. The important challenge therefore is: to stop that oppressive sense of inferiority, to instill courage, to create a vision.¹¹³

Thus, it becomes clear that in “The White Man on Trial,” Heschel is engaged in the kind of correction of Americans’ various misinterpretations of Blacks that he theorizes in *Who Is Man?* Moreover, it is clear that he understands the Civil Rights Movement broadly and the situation in America in 1963-1964 specifically to offer Americans a genuine opportunity to reimagine the humanity of their fellow compatriots in light of to a humanistic axiology; he is calling for the reinterpretation by both blacks and whites of their image of the humanity of Black Americans according to human being as a category of value.

Because the nature of the problem is spiritual, moreover, Heschel maintains that an “administrative solution” will not be sufficient to solve it. Rather, Heschel advises that all Americans will have to bear witness—in their minds, hearts, and actions—to a key value of the American democratic political tradition, namely equality. He warns that “Ideas have *power*, ideas have *life*. But no idea has *self-perpetuating* power, no idea is assured of *immortal* life. The life of an idea depends upon the commitment of a people to it. Let this commitment be reduced to lip-service, and the idea will die.”¹¹⁴ And the idea that Heschel goes onto suggest that Americans need to recommit themselves to spiritually, and continue giving witness to, at this juncture is the “proposition that all men are created equal.”¹¹⁵

Thus we observe Heschel, in his effort to make plain the need to redeem the image of the dignity and value of the black person in minds of white and Black Americans alike, using Abraham Lincoln’s famous phrase to invoke American democracy’s political ethic of belief in

¹¹³ Ibid., 105.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 104.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 108.

equality. He does so in order to make plain the “trial” that the white man, and by extension all Americans face, namely: the challenge of keeping this belief in equality alive both in Americans’ minds and hearts as well as actions.

To make this point about the precariousness of our inherited American-democratic belief in equality, Heschel engages in an extended exposition of it:

The validity of the idea of equality, so dear, so precious to all of us, must not be taken for granted. Unless we continue to be fighting witnesses, unless we live it, it might die on our lips. Let us remember that the equality of all men, regardless of race, culture, and religion, is still not accepted universally in our own day nor was it widely accepted in years gone by.

Hailed by Thomas Jefferson as a self-evident truth, it has been denounced by William Sumner as a flagrant falsehood. Recalled by Abraham Lincoln as the proposition to which this nation was dedicated, it has been branded by Calhoun as an absurd hypothesis. Seen by DeToqueville as synonymous with democracy, it has been equated by Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler with a democracy that is spurious. Claimed by Laski to be the necessary condition for liberty, it has been cited by Lord Acton as the “deepest cause which made the French Revolution so disastrous to liberty.” It has been dubbed by Rufus Choate as a “glittering generality, and assailed by Emile Faguet as the “democratic tarantula.”¹¹⁶

Invoking Jefferson, Lincoln, and De Toqueville, Heschel highlights the fact that the American-democratic political tradition harbors a long tradition of asserting a belief in equality. However, he also makes plain that this tradition of belief has never been without its detractors in American history. Nor has the belief in equality been universally accepted. Heschel invokes symbols of the American-democratic tradition to make the point that those who have professed a belief in the American-democratic tradition’s ideal of equality have faced also faced similar “trials” to those faced by his audience in 1964. In this passage, we observe Heschel making recourse to the references by key figures from the American-democratic political tradition to American democracy’s political ethic of belief in order to help his audience make sense of the task they face.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 104.

It is at this juncture that Heschel offers his most clearly overlapping interpretation of the situation Americans face in 1964. Immediately following these references, Heschel introduces theological language in order to make the point that the task at hand, the reinterpretation of Black Americans according to human being as a category of value, is a moral and religious one. He warns his audience that:

The challenge we face is a test of our integrity. We are all on trial, we are all under judgment. The issue is not political or social experience. The issue is whether we are morally strong, whether we are spiritually worthy to answer God's demand. Shall we continue to be deaf, shall we continue to be sensitive only when our own needs and interests are involved?

We have attained a high standard of living. We must seek to attain a high standard of thinking.

The problem we face is to be or not to be human. The situation of the Negro is the test, the trial, and the risk.¹¹⁷

Two points are significant here. First, Heschel makes plain that the challenge to adopt and enact the ideal of equality is not merely one required by our American-democratic political tradition. He states clearly that it is, in fact, "God's demand." The "trial" we face in doing amounts to nothing more and nothing less than our ability to live up to what God expects from us.

This theological reference is brief, and Heschel's religious language in this extended reflection on the American-democratic value of equality is helpfully illuminated by examining keys statements on equality from Heschel's other famous speech on race, which he gave as the opening address at the "Conference on Race and Religion" in Chicago in January 1963.¹¹⁸ In it, Heschel advocates for the equal dignity of Black Americans by demonstrating that racism is the very antithesis of religion.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 104.

¹¹⁸ Heschel, "Religion and Race" in *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux: 1966), 85-100.

In the course of making this point, Heschel provides an interpretation of the political ideal of equality in light of the Jewish religious tradition. He argues in this address that “Equality of man is due to *God’s love and commitment to all men.* / The ultimate worth of man is due to neither his virtue nor to his faith. *It is due to God’s virtue, to God’s faith. Wherever you see a trace of man, there is the presence of God.*”¹¹⁹ Heschel goes on to stress that due to the fact of God’s love and covenant, “From the point of view of religious philosophy it is our duty to have regard and compassion for every man regardless of his moral merit. God’s covenant is with all men, and we must never be oblivious of *the equality of the divine dignity* of all men. The image of God is in the criminal as well as in the saint.”¹²⁰ Thus, it becomes clear that Heschel’s reference to “God’s demand” in the above passage invokes a biblical and pathetic theology that understands the equality of all men to arise from their relationship to God and God’s relationship to them, and moreover derives an obligation to recognize that equality from this fact.

The second significant aspect of the above passage is the point of overlap: Heschel concludes with an interpretation of the “trial” Americans face neither in American-democratic, nor in Jewish-religious, but rather human terms. He writes that “The problem we face is to be or not to be *human*. The situation of the Negro is the test, the trial, and the risk.”¹²¹ In doing so, Heschel suggests that the overlap between what the Jewish-Hebraic tradition suggests that God demands and what the American-democratic traditions demands vis-à-vis the equality of Black Americans in 1964 is precisely a human one. Thus, Heschel connects invokes key symbols of American democracy’s political ethic of belief as well as his Jewish-Hebraic theology in order to make plain that they both demand from Americans in 1964 a certain kind of being, namely

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 94.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 95.

¹²¹ Ibid., 104.

human being. And in this attempt to raise his audience's awareness of this humanistic axiology, as well as and its relation to both of these traditions, Heschel again offers an overlapping interpretation.

Conclusion

At this point one clearly observes the ways that Heschel's social criticism appeals to a humanistic axiology to mediate between political norms and religious norms. Observing the details of this overlap enables one to draw three conclusions about its implications for democratic theory. First, Heschel's examples make clear that the overlap in question is on normative matters—human being as a category of value. Second, the above analysis suggests that Heschel's overlapping interpretations routinely engage democracy's psychological and doxastic dimensions. I have shown how Heschel's statements suggest that he saw as essential to engage both political and religious beliefs in his effort to get his fellow Americans to reimagine human being as a category of value to face and overcome the threats posed to American society by the various forces of modernity. Third, Heschel's statements make clear that the overlap is hermeneutic and dialogic in nature: it emerges only in and through his staging a certain conversation between a religious and political tradition and is articulated by offering an overlapping interpretation of these traditions in political and religious terms. In doing so, Heschel's statements suggest that neither the American-democratic tradition nor the Jewish prophetic tradition are entirely self-interpreting, but rather, that they both sometimes require elaboration in other terms.

Heschel's overlapping interpretations thus constitute evidence that religious social critics can and often do work semiotically and hermeneutically to mediate between the normative

dimensions of religion and politics in American society. Religious social critics like Heschel identify and utilize both political and religious symbols which appeal to the social meanings that are shared among their audience and in doing so bring those shared meanings to bear on the society that they critique. In Heschel's case, this involves an effort to counter the deficient pictures of human being with interpretations of human being as a category of value that he articulates in overlapping political and religious terms.

Thus, Heschel provides us the third example of a religious social critic who finds himself, like all other Americans, equally required to believe certain things by the tradition of American democracy. It is in response to this belief-requirement that we see Heschel reconciling those beliefs with his broader religious and philosophical worldview. Furthermore, it is clear that Heschel feels himself free to make sense of the beliefs American democracy has traditionally required in the terms which he finds most meaningful. Focusing on these features of Heschel's religious social criticism, we further observe the ways that the American democracy's humanistic axiology and political ethic of belief help order society to the ideals of liberty and equality amidst the reality of religious diversity, and that they do so hermeneutically.

6. John Dewey: Religious, Naturalistic, and Humanistic Social Criticism

The words in which he [Jefferson] stated the moral basis of free institutions have gone out of vogue. We repeat the opening words of the Declaration of Independence, but unless we translate them they are couched in a language that, even when it comes readily to our tongue, does not penetrate today to the brain.

John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*

We cannot continue the idea that human nature when left to itself, when freed from external arbitrary restrictions, will tend to the production of democratic institutions that work successfully. We have now to state the issue from the other side. We have to see that democracy means the belief that humanistic culture *should* prevail; we should be frank and open in our recognition that the proposition is a moral one—like any idea that concerns what *should* be.

John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*

Democracy is belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness.

John Dewey, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us"

Introduction

On August 14, 1858, Queen Victoria sent the first transatlantic telegram. It traveled over 3500 miles via a newly-laid underwater cable along the floor of the Atlantic Ocean to reach U.S. President James Buchanan in Washington D.C. within hours. While it took this 1858 cable two minutes to transmit just one character and the cable itself only functioned for three weeks, the world had been brought infinitely closer together. The latest in modern science was combined with the newest possibilities offered by industry to produce the newest marvel of communication technology. One short year after Queen Victoria's words trickled character by character across the ocean floor, John Dewey was born in Burlington, Vermont.

A new cable would not be operational until 1866. By that time, young Dewey would be eight years old. Yet, in that intervening period, both human knowledge about the world and the technology available to manipulate it in new ways had already changed so greatly that the new cable could transmit data eighty times faster than the original cable, at a speed of eight words per

minute. The world of young Dewey would continue to grow smaller and more connected, year after year. Indeed, the pace of such industrial, scientific, and technological developments affected every aspect of life in the late 19th and early 20th century United States, a pace which has yet to cease quickening. It was in response to this increasingly interconnected, rapidly “shrinking” world, that Dewey developed his ideas and formed the philosophical and social views for which he would become famous.

Dewey’s historical positioning is important for precisely this reason. His life spanned an impressive 92 years (1859-1952) which were book-ended by the Civil War and the Second World War. During this period, John Dewey lived through incredible social, economic, military, and political, scientific, and technological change. He was born at the tail end of the industrial revolution in the United States. This fact means that Dewey found himself as a young man in a society, economy, and culture that had recently undergone massive material, structural, and ideological shifts, but one that yet to realize the full implications of them. This gap provided occasion for much of Dewey’s philosophy and social criticism.

Furthermore, the rapidity of change during this period, and in particular change due to the constantly emerging scientific developments that were productively applied to technology, industry, and communications, cannot be overstated. One begins to appreciate the sheer magnitude of these developments when one observes that Dewey lived through both the completion of the first transcontinental railroad journey in 1869 at age 10 and the first flight that broke the sound barrier in 1947 at age 78. It was in response to the scale and the rapidity of these changes that Dewey hoped to offer a philosophy that could not only account for such changing material and ideal conditions, but that could account for such ongoing and never-finished, dynamic processes in such a way that left Americans neither collectively befuddled nor

bewildered by the scope, scale, and rapidity of it all as well as their own impotence in the face of these large, new, and depersonalized forces.

One of the specific challenges that Dewey thought these new technological developments posed to the rest of society and culture was democratic. Indeed, Dewey returned to the topic of the state of American democracy throughout his career, both to defend it from the forces of the machine age, and to invite Americans to find new ways of imagining their inherited political tradition, its justifications, and what it demands from them now in light of the changed (and changing) conditions around them. Thus, I turn in this chapter to examine Dewey's legacy as social critic who was consistently concerned with threats posed to American democracy, and who, I argue, levied his social criticism to highlight the overlap between the beliefs required by the American democratic political tradition and his own humanistic naturalism.

While his concern with democracy, and specifically American democracy, pervades Dewey's thinking and writing, two texts are particularly crucial for appreciating Dewey's religious social criticism and appreciating his overlapping interpretations.¹ The first text is *The Public and Its Problems*.² Published in 1927 during the aftermath of the First World War, it is a largely comprehensive statement of Dewey's mature political philosophy. As I discussed in Chapter 1, in it, Dewey offers a theory of democracy which imagines popular sovereignty to involve a state of collective mind or consciousness of relationality with and accountability to the others with whom one is in political community. He goes on to diagnose specific threats to this empirically-oriented, popular-sovereign-cum-consciousness posed by the developments of the

¹ It should be noted that Dewey wrote two further monographs that are significant to his political philosophy: *Individualism Old and New* (1930) and *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935). While these texts are similarly informed by Dewey's humanistic naturalism, they do not as explicitly reference American democratic tradition and symbols as does *Freedom and Culture*, upon which I have chosen to focus my analysis here for this reason.

² John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1954).

Machine Age and, in response to these threats, offers a semiotics of social inquiry that is designed to point the way to semiotically reviving this democratic consciousness and thus lead the American Public out of Eclipse.

The second text, *Freedom and Culture* (1939), was published in the immediate run-up to the outbreak of the Second World War and has received decidedly less attention as a foundational text of Dewey's political philosophy.³ Dewey defends the tradition of American democracy against the rise of various forms of totalitarianism (including Soviet, Marxist, and Nazi varieties) that have been a notable political outcome of the newfound technological and industrial powers afforded to state actors in the machine age, and which he views as a threat to democratic freedom. He does so by constructing an argument about the relationship between "freedom" and "culture." Dewey argues that given current empirical conditions in the world, democratic "freedom" requires the support of the various, plural kinds of non-political relations and associations that make up what he calls the "complex of conditions which taxes the terms upon which human beings associate and live together," or "culture."⁴ In short, Dewey argues that freedom requires "cultural" support given current conditions, and that this support will be provided by raising "a new consciousness of human nature" across all "phases" of culture, specifically a consciousness that is grounded in "faith in the potentiality of human nature."⁵

In both texts, Dewey accomplishes his aims by appealing to what I will refer to the psychology, philosophy, metaphysics, and values of his philosophical worldview, which I refer to as his "humanistic naturalism." Despite Dewey's effort in *The Public and Its Problems* to use this humanistic naturalism to interpret the problematic state of American democracy and provide

³ John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

constructive solutions, this text does not provide Dewey's clearest overlapping interpretations nor Dewey's most explicit interpretations of the beliefs required by American democracy. Rather, it is in *Freedom and Culture* and a short address given in 1939 entitled "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" that Dewey offers us both explicit consideration of the beliefs the tradition of American democracy requires, and overlapping interpretations of those beliefs in both humanistic-naturalistic and American-democratic terms.⁶ Therefore, in order to isolate and examine these overlapping interpretations in what follows, I will focus my analysis on Dewey's statements in these texts.

Importantly for the current study, Dewey raises the question of American democracy's political ethic of belief explicitly in these texts. In fact, he sets himself the task of considering what beliefs are required to make the tradition of American democracy work given the fact that many American's beliefs which traditionally backed their ideas about democracy and self-government have changed in response to changed enviroing conditions. He warns that:

It used to be said (and the statement has not gone completely out of fashion) that democracy is a by-product of Christianity, since the latter teaches the infinite worth of the individual human soul. We are now told by some persons that since belief in the soul has been discredited by science, the moral basis for democracy supposed to exist must go into the discard. We are told that if there are reasons for preferring it to other arrangements of the relations of human beings to one another, they must be found in specialized external advantages which outweigh the advantages of other social forms. From a very different quarter, we are told that weakening of the older theological doctrine of the soul is one of the reasons for the Eclipse of faith in democracy. These two views at opposite poles give depth and urgency to the question whether there are adequate grounds for faith in the potentialities of human nature and whether they can be accompanied by the intensity and ardor once awakened by religious ideas upon a theological basis. Is human nature intrinsically such a poor thing that the idea is *absurd*?⁷

⁶ John Dewey, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" (1939), 17 vols. *The Later Works of John Dewey 1925-1953* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 14:224-230, Intalex Past Masters Full Text Humanities.

⁷ Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 98.

Dewey asks in these texts whether the terms we use to make sense of American democracy's aims and justifications are still meaningful given the vast changes that have taken place since the Founders set the American-democratic tradition in motion almost two hundred years prior.

For his part, Dewey does not think that they are, and he sets out to provide a reinterpretation of American democracy, one which highlights the overlap between his humanistic naturalism and the American-democratic tradition as he inherits it. Specifically, Dewey hopes to make plain (much like Murray would do two decades later regarding the Catholic tradition of Natural Law) that the tradition of American democracy has been committed to the philosophical anthropology and humanistic axiology of his humanistic naturalism all along. It is, in fact, for this reason that Dewey believes his humanistic naturalism offers the American society so much promise for social reconstruction in the twentieth century.

In this role as a social critic and apologist for the tradition of American democracy, Dewey exemplifies a religious social critic, a Deweyan-Walzerian prophet of the Public such as are the objects of this study. As is clear from what I said in Chapter 1, Dewey expresses deep concern the Public has been eclipsed by various forces of modernity. However, what an analysis of *Freedom and Culture* and the attendant speeches and texts make plain is that Dewey aims to raise Americans' individual and collective consciousness by drawing on the semiotic resources from both the American-democratic and his naturalistic-humanistic tradition to respond to this Eclipse. In so doing, he provides in his writings overlapping interpretations of the meaning of the tradition of American democracy in *both* American-democratic and humanistic-naturalistic terms. These interpretations work to make explicit the humanistic anthropology and axiology that Dewey believes are common to these two traditions and to bring them to bear on the problems facing American society.

A Religious Social Critic?

It may strike readers as odd that I group John Dewey among King, Murray, and Heschel as “religious social critics.” He was, in fact, a professed humanist. However, I intentionally suspend the all-too-common assumption that Dewey’s humanism, and the broader humanistic naturalism which informs it, represents a neutrally philosophical or non-religious normative framework, to be juxtaposed with those provided by, for example, Judaism and Christianity. Simply because Dewey excoriates religious traditions that endorse “supernatural” ideals and deities does not mean that his own deep and comprehensive philosophical and moral commitments cannot be helpfully compared to the religious commitments of King, Murray, and Heschel.

In fact, as Steven C. Rockefeller convincingly argues, Dewey’s humanism was neither particularly atheistic or secular, but rather a certain “religious humanism” that flowed out of his humanistic naturalism.⁸ Rockefeller argues that Dewey’s humanism is most properly understood as a “religious humanism” that belongs to a family of early twentieth century humanists and humanisms who maintain “that there is ongoing vital significance in the religious dimension of life.”⁹ Rockefeller emphasizes that Dewey’s project was in fact one that self-consciously engaged spirituality and the religious life, even if to reconstruct it:

Dewey is often recognized for his achievements as a philosophical pragmatist, progressive educator, and liberal reformer, but the full and deeper meaning of his quest for unity and freedom is not appreciated until he is also seen as the prophet of a new spiritual attitude and way of being—what one might call a distinctively American democratic form of spirituality...His goal was to integrate fully the religious life with the American democratic life, transforming the religious life into a way of practical liberation for the individual and society and the democratic life into a way of religious self-realization and social unification. According to Dewey, nothing short of such a radical

⁸ Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 456.

⁹ These movements are epitomized by the 1933 Humanist Manifesto, of which John Dewey was among the 34 signatories.

reconciliation between humanity's spiritual values and their everyday existence will bring wholeness to the modern psyche.¹⁰

Indeed, how could Dewey's humanism not be "religious" in this sense given his efforts in *A Common Faith* to recuperate, for his humanistic naturalism as well as his conception of democracy, "religious experience" from traditional religions?

Dewey remained convinced throughout his career that there was something important and evocative about "religious experience," though he rejected the language of traditional "religion" as too laden with connotations of the supernatural. Instead, he argues that the adjective "religious" names a quality of experience: an attitude which lends deep and enduring support to the process of living and one over which traditional religions do not have sole purview.¹¹ Such experiences are present anywhere a human being, encountering an obstacle in the world, engages in "adjustment:" she relates to the obstacle in a way that changes the conditions the obstacle imposes *and* induces in her an enduring, deep-seated harmonizing of elements of her being. Dewey hopes to lift up such religious experiences and demonstrate that they are a "natural" part of human experience. Rather than rejecting religion altogether, Dewey's humanistic naturalism suggests the vital importance of such moments of deep self-realization and adjustment that lend support to the process of living. Even more than that, despite rejecting the language of traditional "religion," Dewey continues to call these experiences "religious."

I treat Dewey's humanistic naturalism as involving a certain kind of "religious humanism" for one further reason. I do so because the role of humanistic naturalism in his social criticism is functionally equivalent to the role played by the various religious traditions of the other social critics treated in the previous chapters. As I make clear in what follows, Dewey's

¹⁰ Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism*, 4.

¹¹ John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 14.

humanistic naturalism is to his social criticism what Judaism is for Heschel's, protestant Christianity is for King's, and Roman Catholicism is for Murray's. As such, Dewey's humanistic naturalism represents the normative tradition from which Dewey draws many of the signs and symbols which he uses to levy much of his social criticism, including his overlapping interpretations of American democracy.

Bearing these things in mind, I will argue that Dewey's statements simultaneously invoke humanistic-naturalistic symbols as well as American-democratic symbols in order to interpret the meaning of the beliefs he takes to be required by both by his humanistic-naturalistic worldview and the tradition of American democracy. I will further argue that Dewey does so in a way that aims to raise Americans' consciousness to the self-conscious possession/endorsement of a humanistic anthropology and axiology that, he argues, is the inheritance of both of these traditions as well as the only thing will help American democracy face the challenges posed by modern conditions. Along the way, I will demonstrate how the example of Dewey's social criticism meets the four hermeneutical criteria I outlined in Chapter 2: I will 1) demonstrate that Dewey's overlapping interpretations respond to an Eclipse of the Public by the multiple forces of the machine age in American society, 2) demonstrate that Dewey understands both the traditions of American democracy and humanistic-naturalism to each involve an ethic of belief, 3) provide evidence that Dewey understands these ethics of belief to overlap on a certain humanistic axiology, and thereby 4) make plain that Dewey provides further evidence of the hermeneutic and dialogic mediating function of both religious social critics and this humanistic axiology in a religiously, philosophically, and morally plural, democratic society.

Doing so has significant helps us to view significant implications of Dewey's overlapping interpretations for conceptualizing the relationship between religion and democracy in the United

States. First, this focus helps us to see that the overlap that Dewey identifies between the traditions of American democracy and his humanistic naturalism, centers around a set of importantly normative matters: a shared commitment to a humanistic anthropology and axiology. Second, this overlap engages American democracy's psychological and doxastic dimensions: Dewey makes clear that it is precisely these key beliefs that are required by both American democracy and his humanistic naturalism. Third, my approach makes clear the extent to which this overlap is hermeneutic and dialogic in nature: a full appreciation of the ways the tradition of Dewey's humanistic naturalism speaks to American democracy and American democracy speaks to it emerges only through an interpretation (such as Dewey's) of the status quo in American society as well as both traditions. On the topic at hand, Dewey's statements suggest that each relies on the others for elaboration in other terms. Because each of these points helps us to grasp the doxastic, dialogic, and hermeneutic dimensions of the relationship between American democracy and the various religious, moral, and philosophical traditions in American society, these observations thus helps us to see the ways that American democracy's humanistic axiology and corresponding political ethic of belief function to facilitate equality and liberty amidst conditions of diversity by making possible a set of shared meanings which diverse Americans, such as Dewey, can make sense of in diverse terms.

Dewey's Consciousness-Raising Social Criticism

It is not difficult to make the case that John Dewey was one of the most famous and influential Americans of the 20th century. A philosopher, educator, social activist, and social critic, Dewey was involved in and/or wrote about many major events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His work has been widely influential, both in and out of the academy.

In fact, he is among the most-cited Americans, ever.¹² While the details of Dewey's activism remains beyond the scope of the current chapter, a brief review of its major contours reveals the ways that Dewey worked during his lifetime to express his philosophical and humanistic commitments through various forms of social action.

Early in his career, during his years in Chicago, Dewey was a frequent visitor to Jane Addams's Hull House. During this part of his career, he also famously founded the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools (1896) in order to put his educational theories into practice. The chief of the philosophical commitments which animated this project was Dewey's belief that the school is a social institution and that "education is the fundamental of social progress and reform."¹³ After his retirement from Columbia University in 1930, Dewey maintained a particularly ambitious schedule: he sat on the board of the First Humanist Society of New York (1929), was elected an honorary member of the Humanist Press Association (1936), served on the International League for Academic Freedom (1935) and as the president for the League of Industrial Democracy (1939), directed the famous Dewey Commission that cleared Leon Trotsky of spurious charges made against him by Joseph Stalin (1937), and was involved in the organization that would become the NAACP, sitting on the NAACP's executive board in its early days. These activities were in addition to his regular schedule of teaching, lecturing, and publishing his ideas about philosophy, metaphysics, ethics, education, politics, and aesthetics in over 700 articles in 140 journals, and approximately 40 books.

In all of this, Dewey articulated his philosophic view of the world and our knowledge of it, puts this philosophy to use helping him diagnose the various problems American democracy

¹² Steven Fesmire, "Introduction" in *The Oxford Handbook of Dewey* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017), xxii.

¹³ John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed" (1897), 5 vols. *The Early Works of John Dewey, 1882-1898* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 5:84-96, Intelx Past Masters Full Text Humanities.

faces and, in doing so, hopes to help us envision and have faith in new possibilities for addressing them. In fact, Dewey explicitly argued that intellectuals like himself have an obligation to ensure that inquiry and its results are used to benefit humanity, a conviction he put into practice.¹⁴

A key, if overlooked, part of Dewey's social criticism are his overlapping interpretations aimed at raising Americans' consciousness to the specific problems facing American democracy. These are found primarily in two texts from this later period of Dewey's career, and I will turn to them shortly. However, given that Dewey's relevant overlapping interpretations are articulated both in terms of the American-democratic political tradition and his naturalistic-humanistic worldview, a brief exposition of this pragmatic philosophy, or "humanistic naturalism," proves instructive.

Dewey's Humanistic Naturalism

Dewey's philosophical approach to the world is today most often referred to as his version of American "pragmatism." This term situates him among the founders of a broad philosophical tradition that was started in the late nineteenth century by Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, and of which Dewey would quickly become a key representative. These "pragmatists" worked to reinterpret modern, western philosophy in light of the broad assumption that human agency within the world is an important part of our knowledge of the world. Dewey himself used multiple terms to refer to his own philosophical worldview as it developed: "instrumentalism," "empirical naturalism," "humanistic naturalism," eventually preferring

¹⁴ John Dewey, "The Supreme Intellectual Obligation" (1934), *Later Works* 9:96-101.

“cultural naturalism.”¹⁵ I will refer to Dewey’s mature (post 1920), philosophical worldview as his “humanistic naturalism” in order to emphasize its humanistic dimensions (more on which below).

Over the course of his career, Dewey wrote many volumes developing these ideas, often clarifying them many times over. He wrote and spoke widely and at length on psychology, education, epistemology, metaphysics, logic, religion, method in philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, as well as political and social philosophy. It is well beyond the scope of this chapter to engage in an in-depth analysis of each dimension of Dewey’s philosophical outlook. At this point, a brief summary of its major features will suffice to help us see how this humanistic naturalism informs Dewey’s overlapping interpretations below.

To appreciate Dewey’s humanistic naturalism, one must begin with the observation that it is fundamentally Darwinian. Dewey, like Darwin, treats the world as made up of organisms that are interacting within the context of environments.¹⁶ This starting point is key for unlocking much of Dewey’s thought because it is this broadly Darwinian paradigm which Dewey uses to complicate the dualisms of modern philosophy between (e.g. mind and body, reason and emotion, nature and culture, and self and society) that have dominated the western philosophical tradition. Indeed, Dewey’s chief complaint against inherited philosophy is that it has become too separated from the task of assessing the actual social *conditions* which characterize everyday life and experience, because it has become too intellectualist and specialized as a discipline.¹⁷

¹⁵ David Hildebrand, "John Dewey", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified Winter 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/dewey/>.

¹⁶ John Dewey, “The Influence of Darwinianism on Philosophy,” 15 vols. *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 5:3, Intalex Past Masters Full Text Humanities.

¹⁷ John Dewey, “From Absolutism to Experimentalism,” *Later Works* 5:157–58.

As part of his response to this situation, Dewey advances an epistemology, most fully articulated in its mature form in *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), and a metaphysics, most fully articulated in its mature form in *Experience and Nature* (1925/1929).¹⁸ Each are cornerstones of Dewey's humanistic naturalism, and thus for appreciating the ways in which it informs his overlapping interpretations below.

In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey argues that philosophy, to be able to say anything reliable about "nature," "existence," or what *is*, must take lived, human experience as its starting and ending points.¹⁹ He argues that a naturalistic philosophy must take human experience seriously because, "experience is...a growing self-progressive disclosure of nature itself."²⁰ Taking human "experience" seriously in this way is what Dewey aims to do in his metaphysics.

Dewey's "empirical metaphysics" intervenes in western philosophical debates, arguing that experience is not merely a mental state (against rationalists and empiricists) and that nature is not simply an object of human cognition. Rather, Dewey argues that "experience" is a process of interaction between human beings and the environment in which they exist, a world which includes past and present actualities as well as unmanifest possibilities. Thus, as Thomas Alexander helpfully phrases Dewey's understanding, "experience" describes "the ways in which human beings *inhabit nature*."²¹ For Dewey, this means that things really *are* what a human being experiences them to be: "experience denotes what is experienced, the world of events and persons; and it denotes that world caught up into experiencing, the career and destiny of mankind."²² Human "experience" involves all manner of things, both ideal and material, in their

¹⁸ John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), *Later Works* 14; *Experience and Nature* (1925/1929), *Later Works* 1.

¹⁹ Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1925/1929), *Later Works* 1:14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

²¹ Thomas Alexander, "Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics" in *The Oxford Handbook of Dewey* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017), 36.

²² Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1925/1929), *Later Works* 1:384.

interrelation, and these things are not only metaphysically real, but these experiences also disclose important things about nature or reality to us.

In *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, Dewey specifies how “experience” can disclose knowledge of “nature” or “existence” through a process that he calls “inquiry.” He begins again in a characteristically Darwinian fashion by asserting that human knowing is itself a part of nature and the world itself, not something that exists primarily in the mind of the knower. Dewey thus pictures minds as actively interacting with the world, participating in processes that constitute it rather than passively perceiving it as some kind of substance. Thus, knowledge, or “inquiry” as Dewey calls it, is a process grounded in human experience.

The process of “inquiry” proceeds as follows: When a human being experiences an obstacle to fulfilling a need or desire through successful action in the world, this experience then provides the inquirer an impetus and opportunity to investigate her environment (“experience,” “nature,” “culture”), to reflect, and to use what Dewey calls “intelligence” to form hypotheses (ideas, theories). She can then manipulate her environment to test these hypotheses. Dewey maintains that, when such a hypothesis successfully resolves the originally frustrating situation, then the solution no longer retains the hypothetical character of cognition but becomes part of human experience as it yields the (re)adaptation of organism to environment, thus making it possible for the frustrated human action in the world to proceed.²³

Thus, Dewey’s epistemology suggests that, as we use our minds to engage in “inquiry” or investigate “experience,” we develop ideas and theories in our interactions with our environment, which help us solve the problems we confront (broadly conceived). On Dewey’s picture, then, knowledge is the result of a particular kind of activity that is aimed at the fulfillment of human

²³ Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), *Later Works* 14.

purposes. Importantly, this understanding also leads Dewey to suggest that we should hold all ideas, theories, values, and beliefs provisionally. Because they function experimentally within culture, our ideas, theories, values, etc. are and ought to be constantly and pragmatically evaluated and re-evaluated. We do and should test our ideas against “experience,” including our ideas about, say, politics and democracy.

Dewey discusses the situation that results from this process of inquiry and adjustment across his writings as “growth,” which is the closest he comes to endorsing any sort of end, *telos*, or overarching moral value.²⁴ This concept is important to his humanistic naturalism because it names both the outcome and the human benefit that results from the type of knowledge-producing interaction that is “inquiry” for Dewey. As human beings confront obstacles or problems, investigate the situation, formulate and test hypotheses, and eventually overcome the problem, the resulting reordering of experience to better facilitate human flourishing Dewey describes as “growth.” Dewey himself eschews the language of “flourishing,” most likely to avoid invoking a eudaimonistic picture of the human good, which is not what he means when he discusses “growth.” Rather, he means to invoke the result of an organism “adjusting” to an obstacle in a way that changes the conditions the obstacle imposes *and* induces in her an enduring, deep-seated harmonizing of elements of her being.

Furthermore, internal to this concept of “growth” is what I have been calling a humanistic axiology. Dewey’s metaphysics and epistemology presuppose the value of the human person as their broad axiological framework. Even though a key part of Dewey’s humanistic-naturalistic framework involves conceiving of the world and our knowledge of it in terms of the dynamic processes that and therefore viewing particular ideas, theories, and values as only retaining their

²⁴ Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy (1920)*, *Middle Works* 12:181.

force as long as they are *useful*, the axiological constant in Dewey's theory is that this usefulness is defined, at least in part, by its use to the fulfillment of *human beings'* needs and desires.

Indeed, as I will make clear below, Dewey argues that we need new, better-suited ideas about human nature in order to make our traditionally held ideas about American self-government not just *work*, but *work for us*. He points out the overlap between his naturalism and the American democratic tradition in order to point out their shared resources for *humanizing* American society.

Thus, attention to the concept of "growth" helps us see that it is this humanistic axiology that makes Dewey's naturalism, in fact, humanistic. In order to capture these features of Dewey's philosophical outlook, I have chosen to adopt "humanistic naturalism" to describe the philosophical theory and worldview described above, which is also the one that informs Dewey's overlapping interpretations of American democracy. In doing so, I hope to emphasize the ways that his "pragmatism" presupposes human beings as an important seat of value.

In sum: Dewey's humanistic naturalism suggests that that, upon investigation, human experience contains within it the ideals/aims/values that human beings can use to order their environment (including their social world) to the human good (conceived not as a fixed end, but as an active process). Indeed, Dewey hopes that his humanistic naturalism will clarify widely held misconceptions about the nature of our inherited ideals, values, traditions, and theories, making clear that, when they fail the test of experience—to help us solve the problems we confront in the world—we should not hold onto them dogmatically, but rather search for new possibilities that will help us solve the problems at hand. In true Darwinian fashion, Dewey suggests that, to flourish, we humans must be willing to adapt. Such adaptation is, after all, for our own good.

A Humanistic and Naturalistic Ethic of Belief

Dewey recognizes and forthrightly admits that this humanistic naturalism makes clear doxastic demands: it involves an ethic of belief. This doxastic dimension arises especially due to the fact that the various hypotheses advanced in the process of inquiry may fail the empirical tests of experience. This fact means that Dewey's way of conceptualizing human knowledge and its application to real situations in the world necessarily involves a certain indeterminacy—our hypotheses may not work. This indeterminacy, in turn, introduces the possibility of doubt into the equation; Dewey does not argue that it is *guaranteed* that nature will provide human beings the kind of ideals that will continually (re)order human experience in ways that promote the kind of “growth” Dewey has in mind, though he is optimistic that it will. Dewey recognizes this feature of his theory and is famously forthright about the fact that his humanistic naturalism implies and relies on a certain “faith.”

Dewey refers to this “faith” throughout his writings and speeches and advocated its adoption across all arenas of culture. He most explicitly theorizes this “faith” in *A Common Faith* (1937). In *A Common Faith*, Dewey excoriates “supernatural” religion and its “monopoly on ideals” precisely because he believes that it “stands in the way of the realization of distinctively religious values inherent in natural experience.”²⁵ By wresting this monopoly on ideals from the “supernatural” religions and demonstrating that these ideals arise as a part of human “experience” or “nature,” Dewey advocates the belief “that there is but one method for ascertaining fact and truth,” and that method is the method of intelligent inquiry described above.²⁶ In this way, the “common faith” Dewey advances amounts to a certain “faith in the possibilities of continued and rigorous inquiry,” and is precisely the faith that his humanistic

²⁵ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 25.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

naturalism presupposes and requires: a faith in the ability of human “experience” of “nature” to generate ideal possibilities that will (re)order experience in ways that facilitate human “growth” according to their latent and yet unknown possibilities, ones which human beings can use their intelligence to ascertain and bring to fruition.²⁷ With these broad contours of Dewey’s humanistic naturalism in view, we are now in a good position to more fully appreciate Dewey’s consciousness-raising social criticism, and especially his overlapping interpretations that pertain to American democracy.

An Eclipse of American Democracy’s Political Anthropology

Dewey addresses the Eclipse of American democracy most fully in *The Public and Its Problems*. Because I discussed his statement of this Eclipse in that text at length in Chapter 1, a brief summary of Dewey’s concern there will suffice here. In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey defines an “Eclipse of the Public” as an impediment to the consciousness of the consequences of combined action that both constitutes the “Public” and defines the very idea of democratic community. He goes on to identify the diverse technological developments of the machine age as the preeminent force currently eclipsing the Public. Recall a few particulars: Dewey argues that, by making impossible the perception and observation of the consequences of conjoint actions, the unbridled scope and scale technological developments of the machine age have “eclipsed” the ability of human intelligence to perceive and observe these consequences. By cutting off the ability to perceive and observe the consequences of combined action, the environing conditions of the machine age thus prevent human beings from using intelligence to engage in the inquiry that will enable them to perceive these consequences, which, in turn,

²⁷ Ibid., 24.

prevents them from being able to pursue or avoid particular consequences. These three dynamics combine to create the perfect storm in which individuals are not only unconscious of the relevant collectives of which they are already a part but are also unable to act in light of or response to the reality of that membership.

Further recall that Dewey's constructive solution to this state of affairs involves the articulation of a semiotics of social inquiry in which symbolic communication of the social meaning of these consequences will overcome this Eclipse, which Dewey suggests will be effected through experts pursuing social inquiry and artists fully and movingly communicating the results of such inquiry.²⁸ However, as I showed in Chapter 1, even on its own terms, this conception of the actors and institutions who are able to engage in such inquiry and effect such meaningful communication of the consequences combined action is unduly narrow. Each of the social critics in this dissertation challenge Dewey to consider whether actors who levy a social criticism on the basis of the overlap between American democracy's political ethic of belief and that of their religious, moral, or philosophical tradition work to counteract such Eclipses of the Public in the way Dewey has in mind. In fact, a full decade after publishing this theory in the *Public and Its Problems*, Dewey himself engages in precisely this kind of overlapping, religious social criticism in order to respond to the threat the thinks American democracy faces.

He does so when he addresses American democracy and the beliefs it requires in a few texts from the immediate run-up to World War II: *Freedom and Culture* (1939), "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" (1939), and "The Basic Values and Loyalties of Democracy" (1941). In these texts, Dewey specifies his articulation of the Eclipse of the Public from *The Public and Its Problems*, clarifying the object of Eclipse. He argues that the part of

²⁸ Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 180, 177.

American democracy which has been obfuscated are long-held beliefs about human nature—American democracy’s traditional political anthropology. In substantiating this claim and articulating a solution to this problem, Dewey pays explicit attention to both the tradition of American democracy itself and to the connections and disjunctures between it and his own humanistic naturalism.

Dewey’s broad project in *Freedom and Culture* is to consider the positive cultural conditions that are necessary to create and ensure democratic freedom. It is imperative to note that, for Dewey, “culture” should be understood to be synonymous with what I described above as his particular metaphysical understanding of “experience.” Indeed, Dewey returned in 1951 to an unfinished introduction to *Experience and Nature*, in which he admits explicitly that he would rename the book *Culture and Nature* if he could, given that the “historical obstacles” associated with the term “experience” have proved so great a barrier to the proper understanding of his ideas.²⁹ As Dewey clarifies:

The name “culture” in its anthropological (not its Matthew Arnold) sense designates the vast range of things experienced in an indefinite variety of ways. It possesses as a name just that body of substantial references which “experience” as a name has lost...

It is a prime philosophical consideration that “culture” includes the material and the ideal in their reciprocal interrelationships and (in marked contrast with the prevailing use of “experience”) “culture” designates, also in their reciprocal interconnections, that immense diversity of human affairs, interests, concerns, values, which compartmentalists pigeonhole under “religion” “morals” “aesthetics” “politics” “economics” etc., etc. Instead of separating, isolating and insulating the many aspects of a common life, “culture” holds them together in their human and humanistic unity—a service which “experience” has ceased to render. What “experience” now fails to do and “culture” can successfully do for philosophy is to be comprehensive without becoming stagnant.³⁰

Indeed, in *Freedom and Culture*, Dewey stipulates that “culture” denotes a “complex of conditions which taxes the terms upon which human beings associate and live together,” and

²⁹ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, *Later Works* 1:361.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 362-363.

which includes the “relations which exist between persons, outside of political institutions, relations of industry, of communication, of science, art and religion.”³¹ Thus, “culture” involves the diversity of “environing conditions” which comprise a common life, including material and ideal conditions, as well as human beings experiences of them. By appealing to “culture” Dewey draws on his humanistic naturalism in order to diagnose the environmental and cultural prerequisites of American democracy, and in particular democratic freedom, given current environing conditions.

Bearing these features in mind, one way to put the central question orienting Dewey’s arguments in *Freedom and Culture* is: To what extent are the beliefs that that have been required to justify and orient the American-democratic tradition still tenable given the current environing conditions of “culture”? Indeed, Dewey explicitly raises the question about what has undergirded American democracy: “There is now raised the question of what was actually back of the formulation of the democratic faith a century ago.”³² And, as I demonstrated above, Dewey does so because he believes that the particular understanding of human nature that has long undergirded, informed, and helped Americans make sense of their own democratic tradition is now in Eclipse.

In answering this question, Dewey argues that attention to the kind of culture that is necessary to support free political institutions immediately draws attention to what he calls “human psychology,” or the theory of human nature that has informed and/or might now inform American democracy:

The problem of freedom and of democratic institutions is tied up with the question of what kind of culture exists; with the necessity of free culture for free political institutions. The import of this conclusion extends far beyond its contrast with the simpler faith of those who formulated the democratic tradition. The question of human psychology, of the

³¹ Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 13.

³² *Ibid.*, 45.

make-up of human nature in its original state, is involved. It is involved not just in a general way but with respect to its special constituents and their significance in their relations to one another. For every social and political philosophy currently professed will be found upon examination to involve a certain view about the constitution of human nature.³³

For this reason, Dewey examines the political anthropology that has informed thinking about American democracy since the founding and asks whether it is still adequate.

Dewey argues that the original political anthropology that informed American democratic theory and tradition was a natural rights-based picture of human beings as fundamentally driven by a desire for individual freedom, conceived of as the absence of restriction on the individual by sources external to her. Furthermore, he attributes the appeal of this anthropology to various cultural, social, historical, political, etc. “environing” conditions that generated made up the cultural context of the struggle for independence in the British colonies in North America. He writes that:

The original democratic theory was simple in its formulation because the conditions under which it took effect were simple. As theory, it postulated a widespread desire in human nature for personal freedom, for release from dominion over personal beliefs and conduct that is exercised from sources external to the individual. Combined with the belief in this desire was the belief, generated by the conditions that had provoked the struggle for independence, that the chief enemy to the realization of the desire was the tendency of government officials to extend their power without limit. Guarantees against this abuse were then supposed to be enough to establish republican government.

The latter belief was a manifestation of the existing struggle to obtain independence from British rule. It was strengthened by memories of conditions which had induced many persons to emigrate from the old country...

In any event the very heart of the doctrine as a theory was a virtual identification of freedom with the very state of being an individual; and the extent of freedom that existed was taken to be the measure of the degree in which individuality was realized.³⁴

Here Dewey suggests that early American democracy presupposed an individual who naturally desired to be self-actuated and self-governing, particularly in response to various forms of British

³³ Ibid., 18.

³⁴ Ibid., 47-48.

oppression. This original political anthropology made sense in light of the broader cultural circumstances that obtained at the time; it fit the colonists' conditions of oppression, their experience as subjects of the Crown, and the small, localized, and regionalized nature of most of colonial American democratic politics at the time.

Dewey argues that American democracy's traditional political anthropology is now inadequate given the current conditions of the machine age. Indeed, his claims in *Freedom and Culture* rest upon precisely this specification of the Eclipse of American democracy by the forces of the machine age from *The Public and Its Problems*: namely, that current conditions have rendered obsolete the Founders' political anthropology. Dewey takes this point to be so clear and obvious as to claim that it is beyond argument. He writes:

That the conditions which influence the working of governmental mechanisms and the maintenance of the liberties constituting the Bill of Rights are infinitely more complex than they were a century and a half ago is evident beyond need for argument. Whether one is a believer in the necessity for increase social control of economic activities or in allowing the maximum possible of private initiative in industry and exchange, both sides must admit that impersonal forces have been set in motion on a scale undreamed of in the early days of the Republic.³⁵

Because unprecedentedly large and impersonal collective forces operate in society involve “an indefinite number of indefinitely ramifying conditions between what a person does and the consequences of his actions, including even the consequences which return upon him,” this political anthropology is no longer useful in for helping Americans organize their society according to democratic principles, ideas, and values.³⁶ In fact, Dewey argues that, even if one still believes in the principle of equality, the nature of this situation renders the Founders' original political anthropology so implausible as to seem ridiculous. He warns that:

While we may not believe that revolutionary effect of steam, electricity, etc., has nullified moral faith in equality, their operation has produced a new problem. The effect of

³⁵ Ibid., 50.

³⁶ Ibid., 51.

statutes, of administrative measures, of judicial decisions, upon the maintenance of equality and freedom cannot be estimated in terms of fairly direct personal consequences. We have first to estimate their effects upon complicated social conditions (largely a matter of guesswork), and then speculate what will be the effect of the new social conditions upon individual persons.³⁷

Given the immense scale, scope, and indeterminate nature of current conditions, he says, it is nearly impossible to estimate the effects of institutional and administrative arrangements on individual people. These “ramifying conditions” make maintaining the freedoms enumerated in the Bill of Rights more complicated because they inhibit the individual’s ability to act according to her purposes, given that she cannot reliably even estimate or imagine the effects of her own actions, given these conditions. This includes making it difficult to act according to democratic purposes and ideals.

Owing to this state of affairs, Dewey believes that the Founders’ political anthropology is in Eclipse. The Founders’ “theory of the self-actuated and self-governing individual receives a rude shock” because, due to the forces described above, “massed activity has a potency which individual effort can no longer claim.”³⁸ At the mercy of such large-scale, impersonal forces, we no longer experience ourselves or each other to be self-governing or self-actuated individuals, in the sense Dewey suggests that the Founders had in mind. As Dewey puts it, we cannot “locate the individual.” Because the human subject which it envisions no longer maps onto the empirical conditions created by the machine age, this anthropology thus becomes both ridiculous and useless for helping us make sense of and reorder our “experience.”

This observation about the Eclipse of American democracy’s political anthropology leads to a further specification of the Eclipse of the Public. Dewey argues that these changes in environing conditions have also eclipsed the very language of the Founders’ political

³⁷ Ibid., 55.

³⁸ Ibid., 54.

anthropology. Current conditions have rendered the language of “Nature” and “natural rights” obsolete, practically meaningless, because the conditions that gave it force no longer obtain. He bemoans the fact that:

We have not even as yet a common and accepted vocabulary in which to set forth the order of moral values involved in realization of democracy. The language of Natural Law was once all but universal in educated Christendom. The conditions which gave it force disappeared. Then there was an appeal to natural rights, supposed by some to centre in isolated individuals—although not in the original American formulation. At present, appeal to the individual is dulled by our inability to locate the individual with any assurance. While we are compelled to note that his freedom can be maintained only through the working together toward a single end of a large number of different and complex factors, we do not know how to coordinate them on the basis of voluntary purpose.³⁹

Here Dewey suggests that the changing environing conditions have rendered the Founders’ language that described the moral bases of American democracy to be obsolete. An appeal to the political anthropology of a self-actuating and self-governing individual who is naturally free and equal by appeal to “nature” or “natural rights” is now of no use, given that we cannot even “locate the individual with any assurance” amidst the complicated and massive interlocking forces that make up culture in the machine age.

This situation has resulted, Dewey fears, in a state of affairs where Americans’ attachment to democracy and its values has become a mere matter of habit, something “mechanical” or “automatic,” instead of an object of “personal choice and action,” a quality which Dewey refers to as moral.⁴⁰ Indeed, as Dewey puts the problem:

Because of lack of an adequate theory of human nature in its relations to democracy, attachment to democratic ends and methods have become a matter of tradition and habit—an excellent thing as far as it goes, but when it becomes routine is easily undermined when change of conditions changes other habits.

³⁹ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁰ Ibid. See p. 116 where Dewey states: “To say the issue is moral one is to say that in the end it comes back to personal choice and action.”

In response to this situation, he hopes to provide a new language which redescribes American democracy's traditional anthropology in terms is better suited to current environing conditions which can make meaningful the humanistic, "moral" core of American democracy—its humanistic axiology—and will thus help bring American democracy out of Eclipse.

A Reinterpretation of American Democracy's Ethic of Belief

Despite the Eclipse of the Public, Dewey appears cautiously optimistic that this Eclipse can be overcome. Dewey appears hopeful that describing this anthropology and its axiology in overlapping terms will do important work toward overcoming the Eclipse described above in two ways. First, he hopes that it will make plain to Americans that the terms our forefathers used to justify and orient American democratic politics are obsolete given current conditions. He hopes that this will, in turn, facilitate his second aim: convincing them of the necessity of a new interpretation of this political anthropology, a "new consciousness of human nature," that is better suited to current conditions, raising American's consciousness to the humanistic foundation of American democracy in terms that are relevant given current conditions, thus helping to moving the Public out of Eclipse.

That is to say: Dewey's approach enacts his theory of inquiry as a form of social criticism.⁴¹ He hopes to make plain to Americans that there is a collective problem: the inherited, habitual beliefs we once held about human beings and their value, which functioned to orient and justify American democracy, are no longer plausible given current conditions. Rather, they are frustrated because they no longer work to orient American democracy toward faith in the processes of experience and its ability to generate ideals and aims that Americans can use to

⁴¹ This is an approach which also informs the structure and arguments found in *The Public and Its Problems*.

order their collective life toward “growth.” Dewey hopes that, by pointing out the frustration of this habit/belief, he can impel Americans to generate new ideas, hypotheses, and theories regarding the beliefs that might function to successfully justify American democracy and orient it toward human ends in the machine age. Moreover, in his overlapping interpretations, Dewey himself articulates the beliefs that he thinks now can function in this way. Thus, Dewey himself offers a hypothesis which he hopes will articulate the old, American-democratic idea of self-government in new terms, one that will make its meaning relevant in the face of current “cultural” conditions. He hopes to be a Prophet of the Public.

Dewey’s statement of these beliefs is clearest in “Creative Democracy,” where he defines democracy as: 1) faith in “human nature” and the “potential” and “possibilities of human beings” to develop their endowments if proper conditions are furnished, 2) faith in humans’ capacity for intelligent judgment in response to the free play of ideas, and 3) faith in humans’ capacity for cooperative action instead of mere domination or suppression.⁴² These three features comprise the “new psychology of human nature,” which Dewey draws on his humanistic naturalism to articulate and which he argues is already part of and assumed by the American democratic tradition itself. Dewey’s consciousness-raising efforts are designed to help Americans meet their current problems by calling on them to embrace the anthropological and axiology parts of their own political tradition that overlap with humanistic naturalism, while leaving behind those which have ceased to function to human ends.

⁴² Ibid., 226-228.

Dewey's Overlapping Interpretations

Now we are in a position to see precisely how Dewey responds to the Eclipse of the Public by invoking humanistic-naturalistic symbols as well as American-democratic symbols in order to interpret the meaning of the beliefs he takes to be required by both his humanistic naturalism and American democracy. In this section, I will make these connections explicit by focusing on Dewey's proposed solution to this Eclipse and the genealogical-historical overlap he identifies between the two traditions.

Dewey's argument about the historical-genealogical overlap of American democracy and his humanistic naturalism involves two claims. The first is lapsarian: we no longer understand the meaning of our political inheritance. The second is reassuring and therapeutic: we can rediscover it and create it anew under current conditions. Beginning with the assumption that democracy is a dynamic form of life existing in the context of changing environing conditions, Dewey suggests that the way to be true to the meaning of American democracy's "moral" core—its political anthropology and corresponding axiology—is to reinterpret its meaning in light of current environing conditions. It is this reinterpretation of its meaning which Dewey aims to effect and which he articulates in overlapping terms.

A Genealogical-Historical Overlap

Dewey's overlapping interpretations comprise an intentionally revisionist genealogical-historical narrative about this overlap, namely: the tradition of American democracy has always been committed to some of the key beliefs required by his humanistic naturalism: namely, faith in human experience (i.e. culture) itself to generate the aims and methods that humans will be able to use to order that experience in ways that will enhance their lives. This picture of self-

governance is in contrast to other social and political ideologies which, according to Dewey, always submit experience to some kind of external control.⁴³ Reading Dewey's statements in this *Freedom and Culture*, especially in conjunction with two of his shorter speeches on American democracy from the same period, makes this narrative evident.

Dewey's historical-genealogical narrative begins with the claim that Americans no longer understand the meaning of our political inheritance, specifically the moral or psychological nature of democracy. Dewey maintains that Americans have come to believe in the value of self-government a way that is "mechanical," a matter of "tradition" or "habit," rather than a self-conscious, deliberate one, characterized by desire, purpose, and effort. As I suggested in the previous section, Dewey worries that this mechanical view has inhibited Americans' creative response in reimagining their political ideas and democratic institutions in response to the rapidly changed and changing conditions in American society—indeed, it is one dimension of the Eclipse described above.

Dewey argues that this meaning has been eclipsed, at least in part, because this habitual attachment to it has enabled the idea of democracy which Americans have inherited from their ancestors to become laden with spurious interpretations and meanings—ones which are true neither to what the Founders' intended nor what is implied by the concept of democracy itself.

He writes that:

The present predicament may be stated as follows: Democracy does involve a belief that political institutions and law be such as to take fundamental account of human nature. They must give it freer play than any non-democratic institutions. At the same time, the theory, legalist and moralist, about human nature that has been used to expound and justify this reliance upon human nature has proved inadequate. Upon the legal and political side, during the nineteenth century it was progressively overloaded with ideas and practices which have more to do with business carried on for profit than with democracy. On the moralistic side, it has tended to substitute emotional exhortation to act in accord with the Golden Rule for the discipline and the control afforded by

⁴³ Dewey, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" (1939), *Later Works* 14:225.

incorporation of democratic ideals into *all* the relations of life. Because of lack of an adequate theory of human nature in its relations to democracy, attachment to democratic ends and methods have become a matter of tradition and habit—an excellent thing as far as it goes, but when it becomes routine is easily undermined when change of conditions changes other habits.

Dewey argues that as conditions have changed, the theory of human nature has that defined democracy's "ends and methods" has lost its appeal, and our attachment to "democracy" has become more a matter of tradition and habit than anything else. Furthermore, Dewey suggests that this state of affairs has facilitated all manner of ills in the name of democracy, chief among which is a conflation of capitalistic, economic individualism (e.g. of the American kind) as well as economic totalitarianism (e.g. of the Soviet or German Nazi kind) with the name of "democracy."⁴⁴ It has left us with a traditional, habitual, and mechanical attachment to our inherited political tradition rather than a self-conscious and deliberate one. In doing so, Dewey argues both that we have a genealogical and historical relation to American democracy's traditional values, and also that the nature of this relationship as it has developed means that American democracy's key moral concepts and values are in need of reinterpretation.

In fact, Dewey makes it clear that he offers his overlapping interpretation of American democracy with the hope of breaking Americans out of these unreflective and outdated traditions and habits. Dewey argues that "the task before us" is precisely the recreation or reinvention of the kind of democracy that the founding fathers bequeathed to us. He writes that we must "recreate by deliberate and determined endeavor the kind of democracy which in its origin one hundred and fifty years ago was largely the product of a fortunate combination of men [i.e. the founding fathers] and circumstances."⁴⁵ Furthermore, he suggests that this reinvention will be accomplished by creatively and inventively adapting our old democratic ideas and democratic

⁴⁴ Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 62-81, 92, 96-97.

⁴⁵ Dewey, "Creative Democracy," 225.

institutions to fit the newly evolved conditions on the ground in American society—in short, finding a better interpretation of them.

This brings us to the second key claim involved in Dewey's historical-genealogical narrative: that we can preserve the historical meaning of the moral core of our inherited political tradition by continually interpreting it anew, in light of current conditions.⁴⁶ Dewey speaks to these specific dynamics in a 1937 address entitled “The Challenge of Democracy to Education,” where he makes the argument that democracy is a dynamic “form of life,” and as such, its meaning must be continually rediscovered and reinterpreted. He writes:

To my mind, the greatest mistake that we can make about democracy is to conceive of it as something fixed, fixed in idea and fixed in its outward manifestation.

The very idea of democracy, the meaning of democracy, must be continually explored afresh; it has to be constantly discovered, and rediscovered, remade and reorganized; while the political and economic and social institutions in which it is embodied have to be remade and reorganized to meet the changes that are going on in the development of new needs on the part of human beings and new resources for satisfying these needs.

No form of life does or can stand still; it either goes forward or it goes backward, and the end of the backward road is death. Democracy as a form of life cannot stand still. It, too, if it is to live, must go forward to meet the changes that are here and that are coming. If it does not go forward, if it tries to stand still, it is already starting on the backward road that leads to extinction.⁴⁷

Here Dewey makes plain that he believes that the only way to perpetuate the insight of the American democratic tradition of self-government is to explore its meaning so that this meaning and the various political, economic and social institutions that express it can be “rediscovered” and “reorganized” in ways that help human beings realize their natures and flourish.

⁴⁶ This assumption helps Dewey reconcile two ideas that would otherwise be in tension. The first is that there is some consistency over time to the tradition American democracy, and specifically its “moral” nature. The second, is the tenet of Dewey's humanistic naturalism that such values are only useful under certain conditions, and that when such conditions change, we ought to revise the value(s) in question. Dewey's revisionist, genealogical-historical approach to American democracy's political anthropology eases this tension.

⁴⁷ Dewey, “The Challenge of Democracy to Education” (1937), *Later Works* 11:182.

It is precisely such a reinterpretation that Dewey aims to affect with his key genealogical-historical claim: that American democracy has always assumed and been committed to key beliefs about human beings that overlap with those of his humanistic naturalism. In order to substantiate these claims, he turns to Thomas Jefferson both to appeal to him as an authority within the American democratic tradition of self-government, but also as a historical example of a representative of that tradition whose signs and significations, though historically and genealogically related to our own political ideas and symbols, no longer carry the same force or meaning due to changed conditions.

Dewey's appeal to Jefferson is key for unlocking Dewey's overlapping interpretation, and so the passage where he addresses his principle for selecting Jefferson is worth quoting at length. Dewey writes that:

The chief reason [that Dewey refers to Jefferson as a touchstone] is that Jefferson's formulation is moral through and through: in its foundations, its methods, its ends. The heart of his faith is expressed in his words "Nothing is unchangeable but the inherent and inalienable rights of man." The words in which he stated the moral basis of free institutions have gone out of vogue. We repeat the opening words of the Declaration of Independence, but unless we translate them they are couched in a language that, even when it comes readily to our tongue, does not penetrate today to the brain. He wrote: "These truths are self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Today we are wary of anything purporting to be self-evident truths; we are not given to associating politics with the plans of the Creator; the doctrine of natural rights which governed his style of expression has been weakened by historic and philosophic criticism.

To put ourselves in touch with Jefferson's position we have therefore to translate the word "natural" into *moral*. Jefferson was under the influence of the deism of his time. Nature and the plans of a benevolent and wise Creator were never far apart in his reflections. But his fundamental beliefs remain unchanged in substance if we forget all special associations with the word *Nature* and speak instead of ideal aims and values to be realized—aims which, although ideal, are not located in the clouds but are backed by something deep and indestructible in the needs and demands of humankind.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 119-120.

Here one observes that Dewey calls for the recuperation of the “moral” foundation of American democratic self-government precisely through the translation of Jefferson’s ideas into terms that today carry the same force and meaning. Jefferson’s words, Dewey suggests, cry out for reinterpretation.

Dewey argues that it is the current unsuitability of the Founders’ language that requires from anyone committed to democracy the creation of new ways to articulate the “intrinsic moral nature of democracy” that are intelligible, meaningful, and effective given current “conditions of culture.” He writes that:

With the founders of American democracy, the claims of democracy were inherently one with the demands of a just and equal morality. We cannot now well use their vocabulary. Changes in knowledge have outlawed the significations of the words they commonly used. But in spite of the unsuitability of much of their language for present use, what they asserted was that self-governing institutions are the means by which human nature can secure its fullest realization in the greatest number of persons. The question of what is involved in self-government methods is now much more complex. But for this very reason, the task of those who retain belief in democracy is to revive and maintain in full vigor the original conviction of the intrinsic moral nature of democracy, now stated in ways congruous with present conditions of culture. We have advanced enough to say democracy is a way of life. We have yet to realize that it is a way of personal life and one which provides a moral standard for personal conduct.⁴⁹

In this way, Dewey makes clear that the fact that these inherited ideas no longer serve the original human ends of democracy will frustrate and motivate anyone who truly believes in democracy to offer a more meaningful and effective interpretation. This situation clearly frustrates Dewey, and this reinterpretation is precisely his hermeneutic project.

Furthermore, Dewey holds up the Founders themselves as model figures who engaged in such creative reinterpretation in their own day. He describes them as “a group of men who were capable of readapting older institutions and ideas to meet the situations provided by new physical

⁴⁹ Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 101.

conditions—a group of men extraordinarily gifted in political inventiveness.”⁵⁰ In in their appropriation and interpretation of human “nature” in terms of natural rights, they engaged in precisely the kind of this kind of creative reinterpretation and reappropriation in their own time.

In order to articulate such reinterpretation in his own time, Dewey highlights an overlap between what Jefferson and the Founders called “natural” and what Dewey understands by the term “moral” in order to offer a psychological reinterpretation of American democracy. In Jefferson’s language of natural rights, Dewey recognizes a key anthropological and axiological insight. However, because the language of natural rights is ill-suited to current conditions, Dewey advocates for a reinterpretation of the ideas surrounding the concept of “nature” that undergirds such thinking about natural rights into terms he thinks better fit those conditions. Dewey himself is clear about this revisionist and hermeneutic agenda.⁵¹ Indeed, Dewey suggests that we can today best make sense of Jefferson’s fundamental beliefs about the moral heart of democracy by speaking in terms of “aims and values to be realized” that are “moral” (an object of personal choice and action) and which can order experience to better serve human flourishing. To make sense of Jefferson as well as our inherited political tradition, we Dewey appeals to the terms of his humanistic naturalism.

These claims are helpfully illuminated by turning to the passages in which Dewey unpacks the more adequate interpretation of American democracy’s moral nature that he has in mind, which he refers to as “a new psychology of human nature.” This interpretation comes chiefly in the form of a reinterpretation of the Founders’ political anthropology, which Dewey understands to be a picture of human beings as able to self-actualize and self-govern given the simple absence of constraints on them. He argues that to preserve its core insight in the face of

⁵⁰ Dewey, “Creative Democracy”, 225.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

current cultural conditions, democracy's traditional anthropology ought to be understood instead to be humanistic, grounded in the faith of the possibilities of human nature. Dewey describes the way that democracy itself implies this humanism as follows:

Were I to say that democracy needs a new psychology of human nature, one adequate to the heavy demands put upon it by foreign and domestic conditions, I might be taken to utter an academic irrelevancy. But if the remark is understood to mean that democracy has always been allied with humanism, with faith in the potentialities of human nature, and that the present need is a vigorous reassertion of this faith, developed in relevant ideas and manifested in practical attitudes, it but continues the American tradition. For belief in the "common man" has no significance save as an expression of belief in the intimate and vital connection of democracy and human nature.

We cannot continue the idea that human nature when left to itself, when freed from external arbitrary restrictions, will tend to the production of democratic institutions that work successfully. We have now to state the issue from the other side. We have to see that democracy means the belief that humanistic culture *should* prevail; we should be frank and open in our recognition that the proposition is a moral one—like any idea that concerns what *should* be.⁵²

Dewey argues that American democracy presupposes and has always had implicit within it a progressive picture of human beings as full of "possibilities" that can and will be realized if and when proper conditions are furnished. In this way, Dewey argues that the meaning of American democracy's traditional moral core can today be best made sense of in terms of this "new psychology of human nature," which is informed by his humanistic naturalism.

As I noted above, Dewey further specifies that this psychological reinterpretation of American democracy involves a political anthropology with three key features. These include: 1) faith in "human nature" and the "potential" and "possibilities of human beings" to develop their endowments if proper conditions are furnished, 2) faith in humans' capacity for intelligent judgment in response to the free play of ideas, and 3) faith in humans' capacity for cooperative action instead of mere domination or suppression.⁵³ Thus emerges from this psychological

⁵² Ibid., 96.

⁵³ Ibid., 226-228.

picture of American democracy a theory of human nature that understands human beings to be intelligent, cooperative, and progressive beings, who can and will develop their native endowments, both individually and collectively, if the right conditions obtain.

In fact, Dewey argues that for the humanistic, moral core of American democracy—the idea that society should be ordered to facilitate human development, growth, and flourishing—to be realized given current conditions, Americans must adopt a set of humanistic-naturalistic beliefs. These as summarized as follows: faith in human experience (i.e. culture) to generate the aims and methods which human intelligence can use to order that experience in ways that will enable human “potentialities” to be realized. Dewey explicitly states this point in “Creative Democracy,” writing that “democracy is belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness.” Here, too, Dewey is clear that he advances this understanding of democracy in specifically in order to reinterpret old ideas in light of current conditions, claiming that “democracy as a personal, individual way of life involves nothing fundamentally new. But when applied it puts a new practical meaning in old ideas.”⁵⁴ In this way, Dewey suggests that American democracy has long harbored a commitment to this naturalistic and humanistic ethic of belief.

At the end of *Freedom and Culture*, Dewey returns to Jefferson to provide further evidence in support of his genealogical-historical claim that this “new psychology of human nature” that is informed by his humanistic naturalism is something to which American democracy has long been committed. Dewey writes that:

I have referred with some particularity to Jefferson’s ideas upon special points because of the proof they afford that the source of the American democratic tradition is moral—not technical, abstract, narrowly political nor materially utilitarian. It is moral because [it is] based on faith in the ability of human nature to achieve freedom for individuals

⁵⁴ Ibid.

accompanied with respect and regard for other persons and with social stability built on cohesion instead of coercion.⁵⁵

He argues that three aspects of Jefferson's thought and legacy support this interpretation that American democracy has long been committed to this humanistic-naturalistic political anthropology. First, he argues that Jefferson's statements provide further evidence that American democracy has been committed not only to a moral and humanistic project, but an empiricist and experimentalist approach to government. As Dewey points to "a score of passages could be cited in which Jefferson refers to the American Government as an *experiment*."⁵⁶ He argues that Jefferson himself suggests both that although American democracy's unchanging core is "moral," it has always been a political tradition that conceived of government as responding to changing conditions.⁵⁷ Second, Dewey argues that Jefferson favored small, local units of government that involved face-to-face communication about shared problems, in order to suggest that American democracy has also been committed to a vision of community based communication and cooperation structured around in joint inquiry into common problems. Third, Dewey interprets Jefferson's use of the phrase "pursuit of happiness" to align with the "faith in the possibilities of human nature" described above, arguing that it meant for Jefferson "for nothing less than the claim of every human being to choose his own career and to act upon his own choice and judgment free from restraints and constraints imposed by the arbitrary will of other human beings."⁵⁸ In this way, Dewey concludes with an appeal to Thomas Jefferson as key evidence of the genealogical-historical overlap in the American democratic political tradition and

⁵⁵ Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 126.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 120-121.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

his own humanistic naturalism. In doing so, he offers an overlapping interpretation of both traditions.

The Overlap: A Humanistic Axiology

Highlighting the above features of Dewey's overlapping interpretation helps us to see that the specific overlap between these two traditions that Dewey identifies is a humanistic axiology. Like King, Murray, and Heschel, Dewey hopes to raise Americans' consciousness to the fact that they inherit a fundamentally humanistic political tradition that understands human beings to be inherently valuable. Having done so, we are now position to clearly observe the ways that that Dewey's psychological interpretation of American democracy's political anthropology is both naturalistic and humanistic.

Dewey's interpretation is naturalistic—grounded in reality or what is—in two ways. First, Dewey's psychological interpretation of American democracy's political anthropology is based in his naturalistic metaphysics and epistemology. Indeed, the attitude or "faith" that constitutes democracy for Dewey is the same attitude that is presupposed by his empirical metaphysics and epistemology, a certain trust in the ability and authority of human experience or culture (Dewey's preferred ways to reference "nature") to provide possibilities which humans can use to organize their experience to human ends. To the degree that it accords a key role to human experience in generating truly democratic aims and methods according to which a democratic society can be organized, Dewey's interpretation of American democracy is naturalistic.

Second, Dewey's psychological interpretation of American democracy's political anthropology understands American democracy to be grounded in, oriented by, and justified

by—not just experience, nature, or culture—but by *human* nature itself. Indeed, in his appropriation and interpretation of Jefferson, Dewey suggests that American democracy has always been (and will likely always need to be) grounded in, justified by and oriented by one or another theories of human nature. It is this idea of human nature which Dewey aims to reconstruct through his interpretation human beings as intelligent and cooperative creatures who are able to take advantage of their own endowments in their interactions with their environment and each other to create new, better possibilities for their own growth and well-being. In both cases, Dewey argues that American democracy has been and ought to continue be grounded in the best current theories about what *is*, both in terms of human experience and in terms of human nature.

These observations lead us to observe how Dewey’s psychological interpretation of American democracy’s political anthropology is also humanistic. Dewey suggests that the end that orients both American democracy as well as Dewey’s humanistic naturalism is the value of the human being—understood as value driving from the latent, and yet undiscovered “possibilities” and “potentialities” in each of us. These human potentialities are a function of humans’ ability to use intelligence to order their experience in ways that overcome the obstacles that they encounter and thus yield “adjustment,” or “growth” that alters the obstacle’s conditions and also yields a harmonization of the parts of the self. In short, humans have the potential to order their worlds in ways that they determine to be good for them, though this ordering cannot be predicted in advance or in the abstract.

Dewey does not use the language of axiology to describe this theory of value or this overlap, and he is wary to speak of values, due to his deep conviction that values cannot and should not be conceived of as static or fixed. Yet, in a passage from “The Basic Values and

Loyalties of Democracy,” Dewey clarifies that what is at stake in the adoption/expansion of a humanistic understanding of democracy as belief in the potentialities of every human being is precisely the *value* implied by every person’s potential humanity:

In theory, democracy has always professed belief in the potentialities of every human being, and all the need for providing conditions that will enable these potentialities to come to realization. We shall miss the second most important lesson the present state of the world has to teach us if we fail to see intensely that this belief must now be greatly extended and deepened. It is a faith which becomes sentimental when it is not put systematically into relationships of living. There are phrases, sanctioned by religion, regarding the sacredness of personality. But glib reciting of the verbal creed is no protection against snobbishness, intolerance and taking advantage of others when opportunity offers. Our anti-democratic heritage of Negro slavery has left us with habits of intolerance toward the colored race—habits which belie profession of democratic loyalty. The very tenets of religion have been employed to foster anti-semitism. There are still many, too many, persons who feel free to cultivate and express racial prejudices as if they were within their personal rights, not recognizing how the attitude of intolerance infects, perhaps fatally as the example of Germany so surely proves, the basic humanities without which democracy is but a name.

For it is humanity and the human spirit that are at stake, and not just what is sometimes called the “individual,” since the latter is *a value in potential humanity* and not as something separate and atomic.⁵⁹

Here Dewey identifies that what is at stake in each of the mentioned anti-democratic instances of prejudice and exclusion is precisely the presumptive value of each human qua human being. For Dewey, these instances of exclusion fail to grasp that every human being is valuable as an creature who can use her intelligence to imagine new ideas/theories/possibilities for ordering experience in ways that will be better for her and/or her community.

It is this theory of value—or humanistic axiology—that Dewey’s overlapping interpretation of American-democratic ethic of belief and his humanistic-naturalistic ethic of belief identifies: the human being as a stable and important seat of value. As we have seen, Dewey offers his overlapping interpretation of both traditions precisely to make this axiological overlap plain. Furthermore, Dewey hopes that articulating this overlap in terms of a

⁵⁹ Dewey, “The Basic Values and Loyalties of Democracy” (1941), *Later Works* 14:276-277, emphasis added.

psychological understanding of American democracy will help Americans democratize and humanize all arenas of culture in the face of the current conditions which are eclipsing American democracy. Because this psychological understanding of democracy involves a certain faith in “the efficacy of plural, partial, and experimental methods in securing and maintaining and ever-increasing release of the powers of human nature, in service of a freedom which is cooperative and a cooperation which is voluntary,” it can (and should, according to Dewey) can affect all arenas of life.⁶⁰ Were it to do so, it would provide the “cultural” conditions necessary for freedom in the increasingly complex modern world. For this reason, Dewey hopes that his overlapping interpretation will raise Americans’ consciousness to help them overcome the Eclipse of the Public by the forces of the machine age by providing them a new language that they might use to help them order their “experience” and collective life according to the traditionally humanistic, moral, core of American democracy: the value of the human person.

Conclusion

At this point one begins to see how Dewey’s social criticism and the humanistic axiology that it highlights and to which it appeals mediates hermeneutically and dialogically between political norms of American democracy and the philosophical norms of his humanistic naturalism. Furthermore, observing the details of this overlap enables one to draw three conclusions about its implication for democratic theory. First, Dewey’s example provides further evidence that the overlap in question is on normative matters—in his terms: the value inherent in the possibilities of human being. Second, Dewey’s overlapping interpretations routinely engage democracy’s psychological and doxastic dimensions. I have shown how Dewey’s statements

⁶⁰ Ibid., 133

suggest that he found it absolutely essential to engage both political and philosophical or religious beliefs in his effort to get his fellow Americans to reimagine human nature in a way that is better suited to the conditions of the machine age and thus overcome the threats posed to American society by it. Third, Dewey's statements make clear that the overlap is hermeneutic and dialogic in nature: it emerges only in and through his staging a certain conversation between a philosophical and political tradition and is articulated by offering an overlapping interpretation of these traditions in the terms of both traditions. In doing so, Dewey's statements suggests that neither the American-democratic tradition nor his humanistic-naturalistic philosophical tradition are entirely self-interpreting, but rather, that they both sometimes requires elaboration in other terms.

Dewey's overlapping interpretations thus provide us further evidence that religious social critics can and often do work semiotically and hermeneutically to mediate between the normative dimensions of religion and politics in American society, including when "religion" is more broadly conceived to include Americans' broader moral and/or philosophical worldviews that are not connected to traditional religious institutions or practices. Such social critics like Dewey—even non-traditionally-religious ones—identify and utilize both political and moral-philosophical symbols which appeal to the social meanings that are shared among their audience and in doing so bring those shared meanings to bear on the society that they critique. In the case of Dewey, this involves an effort to reimagine American democracy's "obsolete" understanding of human being by providing a psychological interpretation American democracy and of human nature, one which he articulates in overlapping political and philosophical/moral terms.

Thus, Dewey provides us the fourth example of a religious social critic who finds himself, like all other Americans, equally required to believe certain things by the tradition of

American democracy. it is in response to this belief-requirement that we see Dewey reconciling those beliefs with his broader philosophical worldview. Furthermore, we find that he is free to make sense of the beliefs American democracy has traditionally required in the terms which he finds most meaningful, or as he says, best suited to current conditions. Focusing on these features of Dewey's religious social criticism, we continue to observe the ways that the American democracy's humanistic axiology and political ethic of belief help ordered society to the ideals of liberty and equality amidst the reality of religious diversity, and that they do so hermeneutically.

Conclusion: A Public Axiology

Research Questions Revisited

In this dissertation, I have explored the religious social criticism of four mid-twentieth century religious social critics in order to explore the following three research questions: 1) What does the American tradition of democracy require us to believe? 2) How does (or can) religion relate to this political ethic of belief? and 3) How can American democracy be justified in requiring us to believe anything at all? The examples of Murray, King, Heschel, and Dewey each help us address these questions because each offers overlapping interpretations of the humanistic beliefs required by American democracy as well as those required by their own religious/philosophical tradition in response to challenges to those beliefs and to their realization in action. In doing so, their overlapping interpretations provide evidence of what four Americans think the American tradition of democracy requires us to believe, as well as how each critic related these beliefs to his religious/philosophical beliefs, and thus help us to think about the role of a political tradition in justifying belief at all. Returning to the above questions, we can now more fully appreciate how this project has helped to respond to each of them.

Regarding the first question: I noted at the outset the existence of a veritable “cottage industry” whose business is providing answers to the first of these questions, trading in interpretations of American democracy’s core political beliefs. It now has become clear that Murray, King, Heschel, and Dewey are, each in their own way, historical representatives of this cottage industry that is the identification and interpretation of American democracy’s core beliefs in response to the pressing problems of the day. More than that, each social critic offers an overlapping interpretation of the American democratic tradition of self-government that suggests, in one way or another, that American democracy requires its members to believe in a

humanistic axiology centering around the equal value of the human person. It has thus become easier to see the ways in which American democracy requires belief in a humanistic axiology, a regime which I have been calling its “political ethic of belief.”

Furthermore, examination of these critics’ overlapping interpretations, taken in the context of their broader consciousness-raising efforts, suggests that these beliefs, when they are made manifest, express themselves in the form of an individual and collective consciousness of the value of our fellow Americans. In each case, I have demonstrated that these social critics engage in social criticism, at least in part, in order to raise Americans’ individual and collective consciousness to the value of the human person, and specifically that of their political compatriots. Furthermore, I have shown that they do so in response to various forces that threaten such a consciousness—in the form the of the technological, industrial and communication developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, various ideological forms (including militarism, racism, and totalitarianism) that have accompanied and facilitated their development, and the various dehumanizing, expediency-oriented imaginings of human beings present in all cases.

Regarding the second question: The examples of Murray, King, Heschel, and Dewey thus help us to see the ways that American democracy’s political ethic of belief establishes a necessary conversation between the tradition of American democracy and other, non-political traditions of thought and practice in American society. In each case, I have demonstrated the ways that each critic interprets the problem he identifies as well as possible solutions in terms of his religious, moral and/or philosophical tradition *and* in terms of the American democratic political tradition. Furthermore, I have shown that each critic identifies a specific point of overlap in their overlapping interpretations: a humanistic axiology. Doing so, I have helped to

demonstrate the ways in which democracy's axiology and its political ethic of belief mediate between diverse traditions of thought in practice in American society. Because democracy itself requires its members to make sense of and believe in its axiology but leaves open the terms in which they may do so, this axiology functions to create a necessary, ongoing conversation between Americans' political tradition and other moral, philosophical, and religious traditions in American society.

These observations help us address the final research question: Because the foregoing study of these social critics' overlapping interpretations helps us to better grasp the hermeneutic and dialogic dimensions of popular sovereignty, it also helps us observe the dynamics involved in requiring and justifying belief in ways that are amenable to the key liberal and democratic values of freedom and equality. Indeed, we see that, in each case, American democracy's humanistic axiology and its political ethic of belief function as key conditions of liberty and equality. American democracy's political ethic of belief creates a belief-requirement that can be applied equally across the diversity of moral, religious, and philosophical worldviews in American society. Furthermore, by requiring belief in a humanistic axiology that is underdetermined and generic, this political ethic of belief also facilitates liberty: it frees Americans to hold these beliefs in whatever terms are meaningful to them. The examples of these critics help us to see the ways that exercising "the consent of the governed" involves Americans interpreting their inherited political beliefs in the terms that are meaningful to them, a task to which they are equally subject, and one which must occur without infringement of this hermeneutic freedom by passing judgment on or limiting those terms. By beginning with an appreciation for American democracy's humanistic axiology and its political ethic of belief, we

can use these critics' overlapping interpretations help us to think in more nuanced ways about the role of a political tradition in justifying specific beliefs.

A Public Axiology

One aim of my project has been to render these beliefs required by American democracy—this implicit axiology—explicit. Now that we have them in view, more can and should be said about this axiology itself in conclusion. Over the course of this study, it has become clear that American democracy's humanistic axiology as I have just described. It is, in fact, a "*public*" axiology: a set of shared meanings regarding human value that is inherent in the idea of collective self-rule and which can be and is made sense of in terms that are not shared by all members of the Public in question.

I would now like to offer this idea of a "public axiology" as a helpful concept for further theorizing of the relation of religion and democracy. First, I will unpack the concept of a "public axiology," demonstrating the ways that this designation helps us to us appreciate and name four key features of American democracy's humanistic axiology: its nature, status, form, and function. Then, I will draw out five broader implications that identifying this "public axiology" and its corresponding political ethic of belief have for understanding American democracy's normative dimensions and for further theorizing about the relationship between religion and democracy.

Until now I have referred to the normative dimensions of the idea of popular sovereignty as a "humanistic axiology." This, of course, it is: the idea of popular sovereignty involves a theory of value which understands to the human being to be an important seat or source of value, and one whose meaning, I have argued, is broadly shared among the members of American

democracy. I now want to add that this set of shared understandings is a “public” axiology both in order to invoke the Deweyan-Walzerian sense of the term that I have been working with all along, as well as to help me identify and name some important features of this axiology and its relationship to popular sovereignty.

However, my proposed adjectival usage departs from Dewey’s strict usage in *The Public and Its Problems*. Recall that, in that text, “The Public” is a group noun which names the collective that results from combined actions which have consequences that affect people beyond those immediately concerned. In Chapter 1, I argued that, in the context of Dewey’s democratic conscioquentialism, the Public thus represents the popular sovereign, and that the Eclipses of the Public that I have been tracing are, in each instance, infringements on collective agency that would allow the collectives in question to exercise popular sovereignty, and thus be genuinely democratic. Also recall that Dewey suggests that, for the Public to exercise popular sovereignty and order itself in ways that would make it a truly democratic community, there must be collective and individual reflection on the consequences of these combined actions, so that they can be guided by the desire for certain outcomes and not others. Thus, to use the term “public” as an adjective that modifies “axiology,” as I propose to use it, involves a departure from Dewey’s technical usage of the term.

Nevertheless, it stands to reason that, in its adjectival Deweyan sense, “public” denotes anything pertaining to the collective Dewey calls “The Public.” A “public” axiology, on the Deweyan-Walzerian understanding that I propose, names the set of shared meanings regarding human value that is necessarily involved in any attempt to order The Public according to the idea of democracy. When, in an effort to engage in collective self-rule, a group of people connected through combined activity (“The Public”) becomes ordered to a certain collective awareness of

the impacts of the actions of the whole on each and every one of the constituent parts (“the idea of democracy”), this group has then organized itself according to a theory of value and way of valuing that is shared among them and characterizes not only their consciousness, but their common life together. This theory of value and way of valuing is their “public” axiology. Because of its integral role in constituting a “Public” as a truly democratic community that is ordered to the ideal and practices of collective self-rule, this axiology is meaningfully “public” in the Deweyan-Walzerian sense. It is the set of shared meanings involved in transforming the Public into a community ordered to the ideal of collective self-rule: a “public” axiology.

Treating American democracy’s humanistic axiology as a public axiology in this Deweyan-Walzerian sense offers multiple theoretical advantages for thinking about religion and democracy. It helps us to specify the nature and form of the axiology itself and as well as grasp its broader status and function in a religiously, philosophically, and morally pluralistic American society. Regarding the first, it helps us to see that this axiology is public in its nature: it concerns those concrete individuals who are connected in an actually extant Public. Designating it a public axiology thus helps us to name this axiology’s empirical grounding, highlighting the fact that this set of meanings is not an abstract theory or concept arrived at by armchair philosophizing or deductive reasoning. Rather, this terminology helps us to see that it is a set of shared meanings connected to, and in part resulting from, extant conditions and relations between actual people living a common life together. In this way, using this designation helps us to name the fact that that this axiology pertains to and organizes those actual people connected in that empirically extant collective which Dewey names a Public.

This axiology is “public” in a second sense. As I have shown throughout, this humanistic axiology is generic, underdetermined, and general. This public form is a function of the

axiology's root in the idea of popular sovereignty rather than in any particular historical tradition of collective self-government or other particular religious, metaphysical, philosophical, moral, etc. tradition of making sense of such ideas. For this reason, it is not reducible to any one particular theory of value, but rather, is a set of shared meanings that is open to interpretation in diverse and more particular terms.

Third, we can see that this axiology has another feature that flows from its root in the idea of popular sovereignty: it has a public status. To describe its status as public is to refer to its character as a set of meanings and understandings that are implicitly available to all members of a Public that is organized around the idea of popular sovereignty. Because it is always implicit in the idea of popular sovereignty, it is also always publicly available to all. Of course, as the foregoing study makes abundantly clear, this public status does not prevent such shared meanings from being eclipsed by other forces. In these cases, as I have demonstrated, they need to be made explicit in order to be actively held, believed, in, and acted upon, both individually and collectively.

Furthermore, the axiology's public nature, form, and status all combine to create a situation in which the axiology is a set of meanings that are in need of interpretation, and thus also in need of interpreters to periodically make them explicit and make their meaning apparent. In this way, its "public" nature, form, and status mean that this humanistic axiology is ripe as a resource for social criticism. And, as I have shown, this is especially true for religious social criticism: we have seen how four diverse social critics appeal to this axiology in the course of articulating their overlapping interpretations and, in doing so, work to make this set of meanings explicit, intelligible, and thus bring them to bear on the problems facing American society.

Drawing out the role of these interpreters, especially in the form of social critics, has been one of my key aims in this project.

Finally, because this axiology comprises a set of meanings that concern all members of the Public, is implicit the idea popular sovereignty, and is thus publicly available and generic to members of a Public organized by this idea, it is an important sense shared by members of that Public. Interacting in this way, these three characteristics create a dynamic which makes possible the axiology's fourth feature: to mediate diversity. We have seen how American democracy's humanistic axiology mediates between the members of the Public by helping them to connect diverse and often disparate worldviews, life-worlds, and traditions of thought and practice (especially with the help of its interpreters). Now we can see that this axiology mediates between members of the Public in this way precisely because it is too implicit, common, and general to be self-interpreting. It requires that members of the Public set it in conversation with other traditions of thought in practice.

Furthermore, it becomes clear that this axiology's "public" nature, form, and status not only help to make it possible for citizens to set their shared political norms and ideas in conversation with their own particular worldviews, life-worlds, and specific traditions of thought and practice (including religion), but they create conditions that make such hermeneutic mediation required. Indeed, all of these characteristics combine to create a situation in which members of the Public not only can, but *must* make sense of their political ideals and tradition in other kinds of terms, with reference other kinds of signs and symbols. These "public" characteristics of American democracy's axiology are thus important conditions of possibility for creating a dialogue or conversation between the political tradition and other traditions of thought

and practice in a diverse society, one that makes possible certain shared meanings which can nevertheless be understood in diverse terms.

Lessons for Theorizing Religion and Democracy

There are five lessons to be drawn from these insights regarding this public axiology and its role in American democracy. First, we learn that American democracy is not self-interpreting. It is clear that Americans rely on other traditions of thought and practice in American society to make sense of this public axiology. In each case we find evidence that, contrary to the examples provided by Spalding and Hirsch at the outset, the American political tradition is most fully understood when it is made sense of in more comprehensive terms than merely political ones. The examples of the four social critics here provide evidence in support of Allen's and Jefferson's positions: that Americans must make recourse to something beyond the political tradition or its public axiology to make sense of its norms and to hold them as sacred, or even, self-evident. They help us to see that a full understanding of the dynamics of American democracy must take this kind of interpretation into account: it must be hermeneutic.

Second, we learn that religion is among those philosophical, moral, and metaphysical traditions of thought and practice that are involved in helping Americans interpret and understand their political tradition, arrangement, and ideals. Examining these critics' overlapping interpretations, we have seen that specifically religious signs and symbols are involved in their efforts to make sense of American democracy and, in a particular way, the beliefs it requires. In each case, Murray's, King's, Heschel's and Dewey's understanding of American democracy is so clearly related to their broader religious and philosophical understandings of the world and/or the sacred/divine that it is impossible to grasp the meanings of their statements without an

appreciation of the role of religion in them. Even *we* have to make recourse to religious ideas to begin to grasp what American democracy meant to them. This fact is itself evidence of religion's integral role in helping these critics understand and interpret their political tradition as well as in their efforts to help others to make sense of it. Because religion is involved in this hermeneutic effort, a full understanding of the dynamics of American democracy must also be sufficiently dialogic: it must capture the reality that these traditions are in conversation.

Third, we learn that religion is among those philosophical, moral, and metaphysical traditions of thought and practice that are involved in helping Americans hold each other accountable to their political obligations (including doxastic ones), in particular through consciousness-raising acts of social criticism. In a particular way, each of these religious social critics' overlapping interpretations that respond to an Eclipse of the Public have shown that religion can be integrally involved in the kind of consciousness-raising that is also democratizing, at least on the broadly Deweyan picture of democracy used here. Indeed, we have seen how each critic works to make plain this public axiology in order to raise the kind of individual and collective consciousness required by a commitment to collective self-rule. The hermeneutic and dialogic picture of democracy that I have adopted in this study thus helps us to see that religion and religionists not only help make plain and interpret Americans' political obligations, but also hold them accountable to them.

Fourth, we learn that this public axiology functions as a condition of both liberty and equality within conditions of religious, philosophical, and moral pluralism. Indeed, given the sheer fact of religious, philosophical, and moral diversity in American society, American democracy's public axiology serves as a condition of equality because it involves a political ethic of belief to which all Americans are equally subject. By submitting all members of American

democracy equally to the same belief-requirement in this way, this public axiology engages both individual values and personal belief in a way that is even-handed and equal: it does not privilege any non-political set of values or beliefs. Thus, a focus on this public axiology thus helps us to grasp the ways that the political ideal and tradition of self-government can be at once normative and doxastic without giving necessary preference or pride of place to any particular set of values or beliefs that those where are conceptually inherent in the idea of popular sovereignty itself.

Furthermore, this public axiology facilitates liberty under conditions of such pluralism by freeing Americans to hold these required beliefs in whatever terms are meaningful to them. Indeed, once this public axiology establishes an equal, if general, belief-requirement, this requirement may potentially create conflict with or infringe upon citizens' other deeply held beliefs, especially those which are ostensibly at odds with the humanistic beliefs required by the political tradition, as well as the broader traditions of thought and practice that inform these beliefs. However, because this public axiology does not pass judgment on or limit the terms that Americans can use to make sense of the political beliefs that they are required to hold, Americans are thus free to make sense of the required beliefs in whatever terms are meaningful to them.

Fifth and finally, we learn that such religious, philosophical, and moral diversity also prevents this public axiology from becoming monistic or totalitarian in a way that would compromise these key, liberal and democratic values of American democracy of liberty and equality. We can see that, in its reliance on other traditions of thought and practice for full interpretation, this public axiology involves a key check on its own tyrannizing and dominating potential. Rather than claiming to be something like the One Ultimate Truth that which has only one valid interpretation made by one interpreter, this public axiology instead relies on various

religious, moral, and philosophical traditions in American society, as well as diverse interpreters, to help Americans make sense of its meaning(s), including its “ultimate” truth status. It is necessarily pluralistic. This feature helps prevent the axiology from becoming too monistic, comprehensive, or totalitarian by cementing the public axiology’s merely political nature in contrast those of the more comprehensive traditions on which it relies for interpretation. In this way, the hermeneutic and dialogic relationship that emerges between these religious, philosophical, and moral traditions, their social critics, and the public axiology thus furthers not only collective self-rule under conditions of pluralism, but also a truly liberal democracy under these conditions.

Each of these insights suggests that more research should be done on the hermeneutic, dialogic, and doxastic dimensions of, not just American democracy, but democracy as such, and especially in its relationship to religion. The American and democratic tradition of reconciling liberty and equality in a religiously, morally, and philosophically diverse society provides theorists an evocative example of the ways in which a political tradition’s public axiology is in conversation with those of other traditions of thought and practice in society. For this reason, it suggests that theorists with an interest in thinking in careful and nuanced ways about democracy’s relationship to religion must attend to democracy’s hermeneutic, doxastic, and dialogic dimensions. To fail to do so would be to fail to grasp that democracy and religion are related in the very interpretive process of making sense of who we are as a collective and organizing our collective life around that understanding.

Conclusion

In the early days of the American Revolution, the earliest representatives of what would become American democracy boldly asserted: “We hold these truths.” As we have seen, these words and the ideas they represent have become a touchstone, a heuristic for helping diverse Americans make sense of their democratic political inheritance and the obligations that it entails. Furthermore, we have seen that religious social critics are among those who appeal to the truths that we hold in order to explain what is wrong in American society and what to do about it. In the late 1950s, John Courtney Murray adopted the Founders’ phrasing wholesale for the title of his book, to make clear that “We,” American Catholics, “hold these truths,” and are prepared to defend them, even if we make sense of them in our own way. Fast forward a half-century, and Mathew Spalding and Ronald L. Hirsch each adopt the slightly modified phrasing *We Still Hold These Truths* for their political treatises about the most desirable direction for American democracy in the 21st century. Adding the modifier “still” helps each of them to capture not only their arguments about the constitutive role of key political beliefs in American democracy but the vital importance of their reassertion here and now.

In this dissertation, I have intentionally chosen to modify the Founders’ words and the heuristic they represent to foreground the role of belief in the project of collective self-government. My basic assumption has been that democracy is a doxastic matter in general, and the American tradition of it is so in particular. I have drawn on Dewey and Walzer to theorize the place of belief in American democracy by constructing a hermeneutic and dialogic theory of democracy as involving a kind of consciousness of the value of the political other, one which must be continually refreshed and reinvigorated by the likes of social critics. In the context of my theory, “We *believe* these truths” references the fact that our trust and confidence in the value of

the political other is a practical condition of our collective agency, and thus our ability to collectively govern ourselves. The ideal of popular sovereignty dictates that “we *believe* these truths.” As Dewey’s and Walzer’s theories help us to see, we must find a way to believe these things in order to organize our Public according to the ideal of popular sovereignty. And, as the historical examples of Murray, King Heschel, and Dewey demonstrate, the religious, philosophical, and moral traditions in American society help many Americans to do so.

The idea at the core of this hermeneutic, dialogic, and doxastic approach to democracy is that religious social critics, drawing as they do on their own traditions, can and do help democracy understand itself better, especially in response to the challenges to freedom, equality, and inclusivity which it regularly confronts. American democracy gives rise to political prophets who remind us what democracy requires us to believe and what that belief looks like in real terms. In one way or another, these prophets confront us with the claim: “We *believe* these truths.” We may disagree with some of their interpretations, but we all have to contend with them.

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