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The Sacred Gaze

Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice

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To my teachers, whose patience matched the stature of their calling.
CHAPTER 7

National Icons

Bibles, Flags, and Jesus in American Civil Religion

Apologists of modern nationhood are often fond of regarding their nations as expressions of divine will, natural law, or the destiny of a particular people. Whatever their origin, nations are a modern form of cultural and political ordering that is widely experienced as bearing some manner of religious significance, often in the form of a civil religion. Aligning state and cult is, in fact, quite ancient. But the polity of the nation (not to be confused with the state) is probably not much older than the seventeenth century. This final chapter examines the national cultus, the religion of a national people and its expression in a set of symbols that are, in the instance of United States history, as contested as they are venerated, even adored.

The bold enterprise of found ing a confederat ion of states governed by the people involved a risk that caused many Americans great worry. Could a constitutional democracy without the hereditary institutions of monarchy or aristocracy prevail against the fractious energies of self-interest? Many wondered if there were sufficient virtue in the body politic and its fledgling institutions to withstand corruption. It was a risk that seemed worthwhile in view of the tyranny that monarchy was believed to entail and the separate set of self-interests that aristocracy ensured. Yet from the foundation of the American republic to the present, the fear that internal and external forces would result in social disintegration and disorder has persisted. The Calvinist anthropology that informed Puritanism and its legacy was stalwartly grounded in the doctrine of Original Sin, which made many American Protestants unable to trust human nature to do the right thing. Formation and education were necessary interventions for making Christians—and for making faithful citizens in the new republic (in the double sense of faithful). American civil religion, especially after the Civil War, that great test of “loyalty versus rebellion” in the rhetoric of the winners, stressed the importance of ritualized formation provided by public ceremony, holiday commemoration, and the public schools as the crucial moments for the public making of a loyal citizenry. Anything less than vigilance in this matter neglected virtue and spawned vice, which inevitably produced moral degeneration followed by the decay of institutions and the rise of social disorder. The genealogy of national decline began in the heart of the faithless citizen.

All manner of such rituals, ceremonies, symbols, and the national narratives that install them in the collective memory of American identity are the ways Americans have imagined their nationality. The importance of this active and ongoing practice of imagination for nationhood was the subject of Benedict Anderson’s rightfully classic study of nationalism, Imagined Communities. Flags, stories, songs, pictures, and monuments can be powerful means of imagining a common identity. Nationalism does not supersede religion, according to Anderson, but develops from it.1 Civil religion is the cult of the nation (though civil religion might also be other than strictly nationalist). In the American case, moralists, clergy, and politicians who harbored fears of dissolution looked to religion as a countervailing force and such talismans as the Bible, religious imagery, and the national flag as ways of disseminating this binding power among the people.2

The American case invites an examination of the use of both religion and its talismanic devices to promote national unity. I am especially interested in the persistent belief that democracy per se will not work and that the American republic requires a religious vigilance on the part of what amounts to a middle-class aristocracy. This middle class forms a dominant culture that has long relied on mass media to conduct a national cult and to disseminate a cultural literacy that assimilates newcomers and reinforces its conception of social order. Americans and their observers abroad have long wondered about the significance of religion in the practice and maintenance of American democracy. It seems clear that the United States has developed a religious practice and set of symbols that have shifted from organized, denominational Protestant Christianity to a civil religion that varies from an inclusive patriotism to a highly exclusive nationalism. This chapter seeks to trace the historical development of the religious visual culture of national
vigilance. Of special interest is the emergence of national icons—Bibles, flags, and pictures of Jesus that were regarded as sacred objects, totems with the power to place viewers in the mystical presence of the republic. I use the term icon not in a merely metaphorical sense but to designate the devotional image or object of civil religion. Just as icons among Eastern Orthodox Christians operate as apertures or windows to the sacred, so Bibles and flags in particular have acted as sacred evocations of the divinely ordained republic, the nation that is invested in these symbols to such a degree that the cherishing (or abuse) of them conveys the devotees' veneration of the nation itself.

Protestantism, Print, and National Identity

Protestantism on American soil has generally thrived when it has been fueled by a cause. Many Protestants in the United States found ample cause in the early nineteenth century, following the origin of the nation. Faced with the disestablishment of official or state-sponsored religion, the rise of mass democracy, and the arrival of increasing numbers of non-Protestant immigrants, Protestants in the Northeast during the early decades of the nineteenth century felt menaced. They responded by promoting the spread of literacy through the distribution of religious primers and instructional materials and encouraging the use of the Bible in public school rooms. The strategy was to assimilate newcomers and to socialize children into what most Protestants envisioned as a Protestant nation, the legacy of providence and millennial purpose as it came to be understood during the colonial period.

Benjamin Rush, eminent physician, abolitionist, treasurer of the U.S. Mint, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and member of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, spoke for many in 1789 when he proclaimed in an address (issued posthumously as a tract by the American Tract Society in 1830; fig. 63): "We profess to be Republicans, and yet we neglect the only means of establishing and perpetuating our republican forms of government; that is, the universal education of our youth in the principles of Christianity by means of the Bible." For this reason, the Bible belonged in the classroom, a matter, Rush wrote to a clergyman friend, that he considered "of more importance in the world than keeping up a regular gospel ministry." Figure 64 portrays the Bible as a public monument, around which are arrayed the institutions and activities of daily life. The text is open to Isaiah, chapter 60, and marked by a slip of paper that reads "Today." Rush's text does not mention Isaiah, so the illustration is the Tract Society's addition to the tract, a visual prompt that serves to connect the scripture of the ancient Jewish prophet with the modern world, as the bookmark literally does by lying against the biblical page and the ground. Isaiah 60 opens with a proclamation that many Americans had long regarded as a call to their nation, the new Israel: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. . . . the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (Isaiah 60:1-3). The chapter ends with a promise that Rush and many others wanted to believe and looked to biblical instruction to secure: "Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land for ever, the shoot of my planting, the work of my hands, that I might be glorified" (60:21). Rush closed his letter with a similarly millennial hope: public education conducted on the study of the Holy Bible would, he believed, "in the
course of two generations eradicate infidelity from among us, and render civil government scarcely necessary in our country.\textsuperscript{97}

Many Protestants, including Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and Methodists, formed tract and mission societies to publish and distribute printed materials in order to achieve such a millennial goal, even if they found Rush's dream of a country freed of government unlikely. An early mass-produced visual culture contributed importantly to the formation of the ideal of a Christian America. Illustrated tracts, pamphlets, books, and certificates of membership helped attract and instruct children, illiterate adults, Native Americans, former slaves, and immigrants. Tract and Bible societies translated Bibles and instructional materials into various Indian languages for use by Protestant evangelists, who often competed with Catholic priests for the hearts of the Indians. Publishers rushed to issue schoolbooks for use among Indian groups such as the Choctaw, shown here undergoing the orderly rigor of assimilation (fig. 64). The American Tract Society established repositories for its tracts and other publications in cities throughout the Northeast, South, and West before the Civil War and operated regional printing houses in Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Cincinnati, and New Orleans. The items that the ATS produced were placed in cities around the country and handed out by colporteurs, door-to-door salesmen. Nearly two dozen different tracts and other texts issued by the ATS argued against Catholicism.\textsuperscript{98} Catholics replied with their own tracts, which included images like the one in figure 65, portraying the Catholic pilgrim landing of Father Andrew White in 1634, in what became the colony and later the state of "Mary-land."\textsuperscript{99} Catholics and
Protestants squared off with rival discourses about the religious pedigree of the nation. The visual polemics continued, as we shall see, well into the twentieth century.

Many nineteenth-century American Protestants revived a theocratic vision of the New World as God’s chosen instrument for the dawn of the millennium. For the American Tract Society (est. 1825) and the American Sunday School Union (ASSU; est. 1824), as well as countless other Protestant organizations such as the American Bible Society (est. 1816), this meant taking a proactive stand on the assimilation of children and the unconverted. Before America could usher in the millennium it had to evangelize its citizens as well as elevate their moral stature. The union of Protestant groups that formed the ATS and ASSU before the Civil War was echoed in the interdenominational identity of the Young Men’s Christian Association and the Sunday school movement after the war. Their collaborative efforts were seen as signs of cohesion and hope as the forces of change and disintegration mounted.

Although state legislatures eventually ratified the Bill of Rights, which established what has since been widely interpreted as the strict separation of church and state, many Protestants from the antebellum period to the present have used mass-produced images to compensate for the First Amendment’s disestablishment of religion—either by enhancing voluntary campaigns to disseminate Protestant influence, or by appealing to a unifying symbol to gather Christians, or even, in the case of one noteworthy image in the twentieth century (see figs. 39, 71 on p. 230, and 72 on p. 233), by infiltrating public spaces in order to “reclaim” them as evidence of a Christian nation. By **compensating** for disestablishment I mean compensation not for the loss of state monies or a vast membership roll but for the loss of a national mythology, a theocratic vision that placed Protestant Americans at the heart of a cosmic drama. Indeed, in the wake of disestablishment, religious donations and membership ballooned to unprecedented numbers. But the mythology enforced by state sponsorship was replaced by a democratic conception of liberty that, at least in principle, leveled the religious marketplace, requiring new strategies of influence to replace the former powers of coercion. Mass-produced images offered one attractive means of influence.

The task of influencing Americans was premised on regarding them as voluntary consumers of ideas and beliefs. American Protestantism, invoking the example of Martin Luther himself, looked to mass print as an ideal form of mass influence. Protestants aimed at arguing visually as well as verbally for a fundamental unity of the American nation and Protestant Christianity. Catholics, by contrast, because of their smaller number and embattled presence, focused efforts on ministering to their own and securing their identity as Roman Catholic. Not until the 1850s did vigorous polemics begin enjoining Protestant critics. A turning point in this regard was the naming of Mary as national patroness of the United States in 1846 by Pius IX, when he ascended to the papacy.10

Hitting on the postmillennial notion of “Christian union,” Protestants fashioned visual totems for mass distribution. The image in figure 66, engraved by the Philadelphia artist John Sartain in 1849, was distributed by the American Home Missionary Society.11 The “dawn of the millennium” was portrayed as the harmony and hegemony of American Protestants gathered about the new altar of national purpose. Lutheran, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Anglican, and Quaker clergy assemble themselves about the millennial altar and are joined by an African slave and an American Indian, who cast off their shackles and implements of warfare, respectively, in recognizing the epiphany of liberation to which the clergymen hearken. Notably absent are a
Catholic priest, a Mormon preacher, and Baptist and Methodist clergy. The “new world order” visualized here is universal in scope only by rendering invisible the truly diverse, hotly contested identity of Christianities and other religions, not to mention ethnicities and genders in the United States.

Protestant propaganda could, of course, be much more explicit and stringent, as in the case of the work of political cartoonist Thomas Nast. German born Nast immigrated to the United States as a boy. As a young man and ardent Republican, he became an illustrator for Harper's Weekly Magazine. In 1870, in the midst of a controversial court case in Cincinnati over the use of the Bible in public schools (and the same year that Pius IX proclaimed the doctrine of papal infallibility), Nast responded with an incendiary cartoon that expressed Protestant fears of Catholic influence in public education (fig. 67), stoking an old phobia of papal conspiracies to topple republican government. In view of the interests of Catholic and Jewish students and in the midst of a nationwide trend of public schools abandoning Bible reading, the Cincinnati Board of Education reversed an existing policy of requiring Bible reading and opening religious exercises each morning in the city’s public schools. The board resolved to eliminate any reading of scripture or religious books that promoted religious belief and any opening exercises that constituted worship or religious instruction. The resolution had followed an unsuccessful attempt by the board and the Archdiocese of Cincinnati to bring the city’s Catholic schools under the jurisdiction of the public board of education. When Catholics and Protestants objected, the board responded by attempting to remove the offense of Bible reading, hoping to gain Catholic support. It was that resolution of the summer of 1869 that ignited a citywide firestorm. A group of citizens took the board of education to court.

Nast’s cartoon was reproduced and circulated in Cincinnati and certainly expressed a popular sentiment, as the litigators themselves were quite aware. In one argument, a lawyer for the board of education, Stanley Matthews, asked the presiding judges to consider the reverse of the situation: what if a Catholic majority were to impose its Roman Catholic pedagogy on a Protestant minority? “Suppose your children were brought to that school and were taught and were made, by a rule of that school, at the name of Christ, to bow the head in adoration, and to cross themselves with the sign of the cross, how would your Honors like it?” The fictional scene described by Matthews was caricatured by Nast’s print. The illustration shows a priest sweeping away the Bible and textbooks while a student dips his hand in holy water and two others genuflect at school benches made into prie-dieux. Images of Mary (on the left, with swords plunged into her heart) and the pope have replaced the schoolroom’s maps and chalkboard. If Matthews sought to engage the judiciary in a mental experiment designed to demonstrate Protestant majoritarian injustice, one wonders if his rhetorical tactic didn’t backfire. The public opinion to which Nast appealed was shared by two of the three judges in the superior court, which decided in favor of the plaintiffs, two to one.

Yet Nast’s propaganda failed to keep the uproar in place, partly because the process of appealing the superior court’s decision took three years and because board membership changed and principal
figures in the controversy moved on to other matters or left Cincinnati. But it was also the case that ideological lines in the controversy were never so simple as Nast’s imagery sought to portray them. One of the most active board members who opposed the resolution to eliminate Bible reading was a liberal Unitarian clergyman. By contrast, Stanley Matthews was an evangelical Calvinist. The only two Jews on the board split votes on the issue. As Robert Michaelson has pointed out, however, the majority of those on the board who voted against the measure were Protestant. The mixture of allegiances mirrored the religious heterodoxy of the city. As generally the case, the propaganda that Nast circulated misrepresented everything except the groundlessness of Protestant paranoia. When the Ohio Supreme Court reversed the decision in 1873, Cincinnati took the ruling in stride, and the Bible vanished forever from the city’s public schools.

From the Bible to the Flag

American political life has been shaped by a history of responding to immigration. Since the Democratic Party, based in the South, relied on immigrant votes to counterbalance the entrepreneurial and industrialist power of the Republicans in the North, the Republican Party often voiced national anxieties about the threat to democracy that newcomers (typically laborers) were believed to pose. If the Protestants’ fear of Catholics had lost much of its political currency by the mid-twentieth century, concern about the need for a religiously charged national unity persisted. One way in which Americans have historically sought to counter perceived threats of national degeneration, disruption, or balkanization is by invoking a civil religion of patriotism that often shades into nationalistic sentiments.

From the beginning of the New England colonies, education was an important means of civil and spiritual formation as well as a means of acquiring literacy to enable Bible and devotional reading. If people were by nature sinners, they could be taught to counter the power of sin by reading God’s word, and they could become productive members of the spiritual commonweal by schooling. The belief was not lost on later Calvinists and American educators when they faced the challenge of fashioning citizens of the new republic. When growing numbers of non-Anglo and non-Protestant Europeans began to arrive in the 1840s, the national task was only intensified in the minds of Protestants. The fear was clearly registered in one advocate of Christianity in the American classroom, Frederick Packard, Philadelphia Presbyterian, Whig, and long-time corresponding secretary and editor of publications for the American Sunday School Union. In 1866 Packard anonymously published a study of public schools in four northeastern states. “We cannot avoid the conviction,” he concluded in his book, “that under political institutions so free as ours, and with a population so heterogeneous, the exclusion of systematic, judicious, thorough religious instruction from the public schools is a radical, and, we fear, fatal defect.” Like many of his fellow religionists in the North, Packard was adamant about the significance of the public school in the spiritual formation of American youth. “No child, he insisted, “should leave a public school in our country ignorant of the generally received principles of the Christian faith.” Mindful of the legal complications of Catholic resistance to the Protestant (King James) Bible in the schools, which had reached a high pitch in the previous decade, Packard reluctantly acknowledged the power of “the jealousy that so sensitively watches all approach of the ecclesiastical to the civil power.” But he agreed with conservative Protestants that a kind of consensus Christianity could be disseminated in the public schools that would not violate the establishment clause in the Bill of Rights (though he did not go so far as to concur with views of Massachusetts Unitarian and educational reformer Horace Mann that this consensus be detached from evangelical Christianity’s understanding of scriptural revelation). Moreover, Packard had determined that the deeper problem was not merely reading from the Bible in the public classroom. Matters had become more complex since Benjamin Rush’s day. For Packard, the issue centered on hiring teachers who were personally committed to the foundational tenets of Christianity. “No public teacher,” he proclaimed, “is fit for his place, in our country, who does not recognize the Supreme Being as the only proper object of religious worship, and Holy Scripture as the revelation of His will.” (The latter criterion made all the difference: invoking scripture deftly turned the “Supreme Being” into the God of Israel and Jesus). Accordingly, Packard urged state examiners to make a point of inquiring about teachers’ competence “to give proper prominence to the religious element” when they applied for a teaching certificate.

Packard was addressing two fronts in the culture wars of antebellum America. On the one hand, he faced the challenge of liberal Christian educational reformers, such as Horace Mann, whose religion was not sufficiently biblical to satisfy Packard. On the other hand, he responded
to the threat that Catholicism posed. For Packard, matters came down to the authority to be instilled in students as the principal requisite to making good citizens of the republic. He elaborated the implications of authority and firmly charged the public school as the state’s instrument for achieving the benefits to be had by inculcating submission to authority. “To this end,” he reasoned, “[students] should assuredly be taught that the supreme authority is in the Creator and Governor of the world, and that earthly potentates are but his vicegerents and subject to his law.” Once again, Packard can be heard speaking in two directions. To those such as Horace Mann, who would cede complete control of public schools to the state, Packard preached that the state itself depends on divine authority. To American Catholics, Packard also offered a warning: “Whatever inspires the youthful mind (and especially the American youthful mind) with deference to authority, obedience to conscience and the cultivation of a lofty principle of integrity and social obligation, is a most essential element of our daily public school instruction.” The passage is a passel of code words. The “authority” was the republic’s God-indebted state, and the “obedience” was to individual conscience, not to the pontiff in Rome. The “integrity” in question was the integration or assimilation of immigrants into the American stock. “Social obligation” to the welfare of the nation could not be subordinated to what anti-Catholic Protestants regarded as the potentially treasonous obedience of Catholic Americans, or at least the obedience of the priesthood and religious orders, to the papacy, which Protestant nativists believed was engaged in an international conspiracy to topple republican governments.

Whether it was the more recognizably Protestant sensibility of Packard or the more liberal religious views of Horace Mann, the generalized Christianity that was advocated by Protestant educational activists in the antebellum United States was a form of civil religion that served as a strategy of assimilating immigrants, the poor, and the working classes. To be a good American, one needed to be a Protestant Christian. The aim was to bind all members of the society to the good of the republic, pitting the cultivation of social virtues against the divisive powers of vice. Packard’s book, which appeared the year after the Civil War ended, was intended to seize an initiative for reform in the wake of the greatest threat by far to the nation’s unity. In the new context of the costly victory of the North, the national flag acquired a special status, even a presence as the effulgent symbol of national unity. This is quite clear in Henry Ward Beecher’s celebrated paean to the flag. In 1861, following the outbreak of the war, Beecher assured an Union audience that the flag “is not a painted rag. It is a whole national history ... It is the nation.” In the war’s aftermath the memory of rebellion and its defeat combined with the persistence of immigration to occasion a renewed call for the unifying effects of civil religion fostered in the public schools. By the 1880s litigation had turned against reading the Bible in public classrooms, so Protestant advocates of a nationalist civil religion looked for a new means of imposing a civilizing piety on the impressionable minds of the nation’s youth to counter the perceived menace of difference and division based on religion and ethnicity. As Civil War veterans in the North aged and began to die, the practice emerged in New York City of veterans presenting their regimental banners and flags to public schools, where children, especially immigrant children, might venerate them.

Nationalistic patriotism and the public school intermingled and helped to forge a new variety of American civil religion.

In the spring of 1888, Colonel George T. Balch (1826–1894), West Point graduate, Civil War veteran, and auditor of the New York City Board of Education, visited a large metropolitan public school in the city in order to observe morning exercises. Balch was preparing a history of tenement housing in the city and had become interested in the role of public education in the condition of the urban poor. For fifteen minutes that morning he observed a patriotic ritual in which immigrant school children assembled before the American flag. The event touched him deeply. Balch later wrote that he had never learned so much about patriotism as in those few moments, and he declared that he glimpsed “in them the germ of a patriotic movement, which, in the hands of wise and judicious teachers, could be made to produce results, the far-reaching consequences of which it would be impossible to prognosticate at this time.”

Balch went to the school that morning possibly to witness the presentation of a Civil War flag or possibly to observe the patriotic ritual that had come to his attention as a result of recent presentations of Civil War colors to public schools. In any event, his response to the ritual veneration of the flag was informed by his concern for the future of the republic assailed by immigration. In 1890 he published a detailed guidebook for promoting patriotism in the public school. He brought to it an army bureaucrat’s eye for procedure and produced a blueprint for the public ritual of a national piety that anticipated the Pledge of Allegiance to the national flag, which would become the central symbol of American nationalism in public schools over the next century. Balch’s now largely forgotten book merits close attention, since it prescribes
practices for the public school that stipulate a cultic veneration of the flag and signal its new status as the national icon.

Colonel Balch regarded the American public schools as the government-funded and controlled equivalent of the paternalistic benevolent association, the great Victorian engine of benevolence and social amelioration. It was the public schools that would now engineer mass salvation in American society, redeeming the immigrant hordes and securing the future of the republic. Balch’s candor could be startling. He explained that his book’s task was to show how this human scum, cast on our shores by the tidal wave of a vast immigration, has not been allowed to perish, but as the wards of humanity, under the benign influences of American institutions, and through personal contact with the refined and noble representations of a higher civilization, have been regenerated, and had opened up to them in strange and wide contrast with their hopeless surroundings, all the bright possibilities of an honest and useful life, and of an intelligent and honorable American citizenship.27

Balch openly despised sectarian schools, identifying their majority as Roman Catholic and the remainder as Lutheran (German-speaking), Jewish, and the “Episcopal, the Scotch Presbyterian, and the Quaker faiths.” The problem with the first three was their resistance to assimilation, which amounted to nothing less than intolerance to Balch. “Many of the [sectarian] schools are made up exclusively of children of the same nationality and faith, in which a foreign language is the language of the school, thus perpetuating not only religious bigotry, but race prejudices as well, than which nothing could be more directly opposed to American ideas and institutions.”28 Immigration and the apostasy of the Confederacy compelled some northern Protestants to view any desire of immigrants to retain the features of their original culture as a threat to American nationhood. In the postwar logic of American nationalism, nationality became the dominant register for identity, subsuming even sectarian religion in an overarching civil religion. Either one was a faithful American citizen or one was not.

The nationalist civil religion was a distillation of “the true spirit of Christianity,” and Balch took it as axiomatic that “free government” was “but the practical application of Christian charity to the conduct and conservation of social order; and that the best citizens are those most deeply imbued with the spirit and essence of Christianity.” But it is striking that his explicit references to Christianity are few. Instead, Balch applied religious language and practice to the cult of nationalist patriotism as it was to be fostered in the public school. He spoke of the Declaration of Independence as “the catechism of the nation’s civic polity” and named as the first means of patriotic education the awakening of the child’s “personal relation to this great nation,” recalling evangelical Christianity’s archprinciple of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And if that were not Protestant enough, Balch identified the American flag as “the sole symbol of the greatness of this nation,” understanding its exclusively sacred character in terms of a singularity that brings the Reformation doctrine of sola scriptura to mind. Such rhetorical appropriations neatly sublimated sectarian Christianity into a civil religion of nationalism. In this light, perhaps the most telling theological transposition occurred in his definition of love of country. “In short, patriotism, to be real and enduring, must be the voluntary offering of a soul filled with the noblest and most generous impulses, and not a half-hearted, reluctant and perfunctory service rendered in obedience to arbitrary law.” Patriotism is a complete surrender of the self to the national deity. Balch deftly substituted patriotism, love of country, for charity, the highest Christian ideal of love. In so doing he collapsed patriotism into nationalism. The public schools were to play a key role in this new covenant, because Balch understood them to be “the nursery of the state” and their pupils as “wards of the nation.”29 It is difficult not to think of the republic as conceived by Plato. The national state was the highest good, and the schools existed to instill this sentiment deeply in the souls of the state’s wards. If Protestantism reinforced Balch’s nationalism, it was also transformed into something else—a nationalist religion with its own code, cultus, creed, and community, to use Catherine Albanese’s helpful shorthand for the elements of religion, which amount to the nationalist ethic, ritual, theology, and social identity that Balch endorsed.30

Balch organized his treatise around a series of ritualized practices for promoting nationalist patriotism in the schools. He described in detail the ceremonies, symbols, and utterances that he urged school principals and teachers to enact on a weekly basis in morning exercises that were to follow scripture reading, which persisted in many schools across the nation. Balch stipulated the dimensions and materials for classroom and school building flags, the manner and occasion for their display, the gestures and words to be used in their display and veneration, the organization and conduct of class and school color guards, the way students were to salute the flag, and the military bearing and marching that was to attend the award and veneration of the flag.31
that day, of the best citizen in the class, instantly recognizable by every
visitor.” In order to arouse “patriotic enthusiasm” generally, Balch
encouraged the ceremonial presentation and display of national flags
and portraits of Washington and Lincoln. The sacralization of these
icons of the nation was installed in the nursery of the state, whose civil
religion promised the blessing of unity and order. If nineteenth-century protectors of the republic maintained that the
Bible was the necessary element in the socialization of citizens young
and new and best applied to that end in the public schools, late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century advocates of homogeneity fixed on the
American flag as the preferred talisman for protection against the menace
of political and social dissolution and disorder. Indeed, the flag neatly
substituted for the Bible, as case law mounted against the use of the
Bible in the public school during the late nineteenth century. While
Protestants were unable to keep the Bible in the classroom on a perma-
nent and national basis, they did succeed at enshrining the flag in legal
statutes that mandated its display at public schools. Eventually they
were even able to criminalize its abuse as desecration. The efforts to
penalize flag desecration cemented the replacement of the Bible by the
flag. The conflation of the emblems of American nationhood—Bible
and flag—is apparent in the speeches, songs, and patriotic practices of
the day. In an address at a banquet of the Sons of the American Rev-
olution in 1898, Charles Kingsbury Miller, the outspoken leader and
chief orator of the national movement to establish federal statutes
against the desecration of the flag, praised the “three sacred jewels” of
the United States, “the Bible, the Cross, and the Flag.” Miller clearly
affixed his call for protection of the sanctity of the flag to fears about
American heterogeneity: “In our young republic, devoid of traditions,
with a mixed population, augmented by constant arrivals from foreign
shores, our government needs a national law to teach these newcomers
to this land of liberty, as well as to remind our thoughtless but well-
meaning citizens that they must treat with public respect the flag which
represents all that makes us noble as a nation.” Miller argued that such
misuse of the flag as political partisan propaganda, advertisement, street
entertainment, prosaic decoration, or as a device to promote labor
unions “sets a bad example to the lower classes, who degrade the flag to
its nadir.” The “emblem of our republic,” he claimed, “should be kept
as inviolate as was the Holy of Holies in King Solomon’s temple.”
This identification of nation with religious cult was not unusual among
proponents of flag protection. In a deliberate invocation of the ancient

Students competed for the honor of bearing the flag—not academi-
cally, which would promote classism, Balch believed, but in the display
of public virtues. The strict ritualization of flag display and veneration
eulogized military protocol. Students who conducted themselves hon-
orably were to be rewarded with the Badge of Citizenship for Scholars
(fig. 68). In order to heighten the medal’s sacred quality, awardees
received it with great ceremony, wore it for one day, and surrendered it
(once again, with ceremony) to the teacher. This militarization accom-
panied the postwar valorization of a more aggressive form of American
masculinity, as was discussed in the previous chapter. It also operated
for Balch as a public strategy for assimilating the unruly children of an
increasingly immigrant society. Students who exhibited the best behav-
ior (modeling punctuality, self-reliance, self-control, self-respect, char-
ity, and generosity) were recognized by the privilege of displaying a flag
on their desks. A flag so earned served as “the distinguishing mark for

FIGURE 68. The Badge of
Citizenship for Scholars. From
Colonel George T. Balch, Methods
of Teaching Patriotism in the Pub-
lc Schools (New York: D. Van
Nostrand, 1890), facing p. 16.
Photo: Author.
practice of identifying the state with a divine patron, an 1895 pamphlet supporting federal legislation against flag desecration proclaimed: "[The flag] is far worthier of self-sacrifice and heroic devotion than any goddess of the olden time." A report to the Daughters of the American Revolution Flag Committee at the 1899 DAR National Convention insisted that the flag be kept as "free and sacred as the cross." Clearly, the flag held specifically Christian significance for vocally patriotic groups whose membership traced a hereditary link to the soldiers whose heroic efforts gave birth to the flag, which "has been baptized in sentiment by the fire and blood and battle," as one member of the DAR testified before a Senate committee in 1908.

The emergence of hereditary organizations in the late nineteenth century answered unmistakably to anxieties about immigration and also to older fears about the mob. It was not just cities filled with unsightly foreign newcomers but also the prospect of mob rule, disorderly electorates voting their own interests, creating their own urban zones of heterodoxic culture, language, and religion. This prospect registered among many Protestants as a threat to the republic, that older ideal that appeared to rely on a middle-class aristocracy. Patriotic organizations formed in order to exclude those who lacked the pedigree of hereditary connections to the heroes and battles that formed the bulging cult of Americanism and to include only those who would unambivalently support lobbying and legislation on behalf of symbols and practices that would enforce the cult.

Yet the movement to make the flag a nationalistic icon encountered resistance. The efforts of those who traced a hereditary connection to the historical origins of the nation and its national emblem appeared to some critics as an attempt to bestow upon themselves a privilege that subverted democracy.

There is one form of desecration of our national emblems more serious than those mentioned. That is using them in any way as the distinguishing badge of those self-styled "patriotic" societies which base their membership on their ancestry or which fund their chief occupation in opposing the influence of "foreigners." If our flag stands for anything, it stands for opposition to hereditary privilege, the spirit of caste and exclusiveness, and all artificial distinctions and eminences.

The same journal article of 1903 contended that the flag should become "commonplace rather than . . . regarded as in itself sacred." Numerous voices in the academy and newspapers objected in the early years of the twentieth century to the nationalistic transformation of the flag into an icon, or what E. L. Godkin, editor of The Nation, called "idiotic flag-fetishism" and the "new flag-cult" in 1909. A legacy of Balch’s enterprise was the spawning of school manuals on patriotism. In the wake of the U.S. annexation of Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines in 1899, at the end of two long decades of economic depression, anxieties about economic instability and immigration were rife. These fears fueled flag mania, which in turn inflated the rhetoric celebrating America’s new project of colonialism. Once again, the schools were seen as a primary means of assimilation. Godkin objected to the emphasis placed after the manner of Balch on school rituals to instill patriotism among American children. Imposing such rituals on public school children was comparable, he contended, to "introducing revivalistic appeals at the daily morning prayers." Quoting from one new Manual of Patriotism, Godkin singled out religious language toward the flag, concluding that the very "sight of the flag" had become "a signal for emotional hysteresis." In another piece from a few years later, Godkin argued that forcing vows upon children or anyone else was not the way to achieve loyalty from citizens. "The truth is," he claimed, "that love of country, in the high and proper sense, cannot be taught. It is commanded by the country which deserves it . . . Give men justice, freedom, and equal treatment before the laws, and you do more than all possible schools and schoolmasters to intensify their national love for land and kin." For Godkin and others rule of law, grounded in the Constitution, generated the willing affiliation that would act as social adherence among American citizens and their nation-state by fostering gratitude for securing a just social order. There was nothing mystical about this bond, but something quite rational. The state would merit loyalty on the basis of its service. The flag, it followed, was not a fetish whose adoration was to be coerced and conditioned but a symbol of freely given loyalty. Moving directly against the grain of the American national sentiment of his day and the following century, Godkin insisted that genuine patriotism "transcends the petty bounds of city, State, or country, to embrace mankind. It hates injustice and oppression wherever they exist. It makes cause equally with the tortured negro in the Congo and the massacred Jew in Bialystok." This internationalist or cosmopolitan perspective discerned in what Godkin called "narrow patriotism" a mindset that remains in force a century later. Narrow patriotism "provokes in [the citizen] an exaggerated military enthusiasm..."
and spirit of belligerency. It opposes international arbitration simply because arbitration requires each nation to refrain from those 'patriotic' hysterics which are dear to many of its rulers and citizens.45

Although Godkin's view was not shared by a majority of Americans, legal controversies eventually supported his view of flag veneration as a religious practice. In a decisive Supreme Court case of forty years later, *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943), the Court recognized that for the majority the flag had come to function as a sacred object, and for this reason it upheld the right of the members of the Jehovah's Witnesses to disobey a state law to salute the flag and to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, the decision pointed out, saluting the flag and reciting the pledge violated the second commandment not to make any image or worship it (Exodus 20:4–5). The Court saw enforcement of the state law as a violation of the Bill of Rights. Moreover, it recognized the state law as the attempt "to coerce uniformity of sentiment in support of some end." Appeal to the religious mysteries of the "blood and battle baptism" of the flag fell before the political philosophy of the Bill of Rights, which was premised on the Enlightenment ideal of "government by consent of the governed," a consent that should not be coerced. "There is no mysticism in the American concept of the State or of the nature or origin of its authority," the Court stated. Authority does not descend from divinity or emerge from inherent privilege or arise from religious sentiment or ritual experience. The authority of American government resides in the social contract of the people.46

Patriotism and Nationalism

The antimystical view of the flag and any national emblem within American democracy asserts their *symbolic* rather than their *sacramental* character. This is an important distinction in the United States, though it is subtle and repeatedly lost in national life, particularly during moments of crisis. The difference can be described in terms of the distinction of patriotism and nationalism in democracy. It took shape in the second half of the nineteenth century in the United States and is evident in Balch's nationalist redefinition of patriotism, discussed above, in which dedication to the nation was not a legalistic duty but a mystical prompting of each citizen's soul. Adherence to the nation, to a mystical version of Rousseau's "general will," reified as a timeless collective reality, replaced the pre–Civil War patriotism of the revolutionary generation as well as the hard-won vision of Abraham Lincoln. After the Union victory, the connection of the citizen to the nation tended strongly to subordinate individual rights to the good of the whole. "The older idea of the patriot," one scholar has put it, "as one who defends constitutional rights, reveres liberty, agitates for an end to corruption, and struggles against the outrages of centralized power" was replaced in the second half of the century by a nationalism that exalted national unity as the patriotic ideal.47 The connection of the citizen to the nation tended strongly to subordinate individual rights to the good of the whole.48

Balch's transmogrification of patriotism into nationalism reflects the broad trend of American civil religion during the century that followed the Civil War. What he championed amounted to the nationalism defined by Rousseau in the final, controversial chapter of *The Social Contract* (1762), where the "religion of the citizen" or "civil religion" is contrasted to "the religion of the man," the faith exemplified in Jesus. Civil religion consisted of the "sentiments of sociability" enforced by the state for the good of the state. This faith boasted a minimum of necessary articles—the existence of a powerful, benevolent, all-knowing deity; the life hereafter; the reward of the just and punishment of the unjust; and the "holiness of the laws and the social contract."49 As a faith controlled by the sovereign for the sake of the commonweal, Rousseau's civil religion recalls the "noble lie" that undergirded Socrates' ideal state.50 Rousseau conceded that the sovereign "cannot force anyone to believe" the few articles of faith, but "it can banish from the state anyone who does not believe them."51 And this is precisely what a majority vote in the United States Supreme Court did in a 1951 decision not to extend citizenship to a Canadian theology professor at Yale University, Douglas Clyde Macintosh, who had declared that he would bear arms on behalf of the nation only when his conscience dictated. Macintosh asserted that he "could not put allegiance to the Government of any country before allegiance to the will of God."52 But the opinion of the Court replied that "he means to make his own interpretation of the will of God the decisive test which shall conclude the government and stay its hand." The opinion continued:

We are a Christian people, but, also, we are a Nation with the duty to survive; a Nation whose Constitution contemplates war as well as peace; whose government must go forward upon the assumption, and can safely proceed upon no other, than [sic] unqualified allegiance to the Nation and submission and obedience to the laws of the land, as well those made for war as those made for peace, are not inconsistent with the will of God.53
The good of the state depended on absolute submission to its priority over conscience. Individual conscience—"conscientious or religious scruples," as the Court's opinion called it—that abode of personal religion in the tradition of the Protestant Reformation, could not be allowed to trump the authority of the state.54

This was a departure from the thought of at least one constitutional framer, James Madison, whose opposition to civil evaluation of religious teachers entailed a clear rejection of what might be called nationalist civil religion. Arguing that "religion be exempt from the authority of the society at large," let alone the legislative body, Madison urged Virginia legislators to recognize that, "in matters of Religion, no man's right is abridged by the institutions of Civil Society and that Religion is wholly exempt from its cognizance."55 Quoting the Constitution of Virginia, Madison asserted that citizens retained "equal title to the free exercise of Religion according to the dictates of Conscience." The nationalist cult of civil religion militates subtly against the autonomy of conscience. For Madison individual conscience and creator enjoyed a relationship that preceded the bond of the individual to the state. In its imagined community, patriotism of this order directs its allegiance to a nation whose social contract differs from the one described by Rousseau, for whom the "general will" ultimately became sovereign, such that "we as a body receive each other as an indivisible part of the whole." This indivisibility sounds early in Rousseau's treatise as if it will protect the rights of the individual, but what the final chapter on civil religion makes clear is that the state is the end and highest good, outside of which there is no life. To be banished is to be thrown into "the state of nature," where self-preservation is, according to Rousseau, impossible.56

Nationalism has a powerful way of erasing or vilifying any other attitude toward the patria. But patriotism is definable as a form of imagined community that is not necessarily nationalistic.67 Patriotism or love of country will invest in the flag and other objects and places a power to recall and to honor virtues enshrined in the Constitution and in the heroic deeds of those who champion it. The focus of this love is gratitude and esteem for the history of actions and events that secured the social contract that renders the nation a democratic reality. National unity of purpose in a democracy resides not in a particular application of national will but in the collective resolve to maintain the social contract in the face of adversity, injustice, tyranny, or external threat. Since the advantage of democracy is the preservation of liberty, national unity of purpose may not be served or defined at the expense of dissent. Unity does not mean uniformity; it means common dedication to purpose, which is the preservation of liberty. When the capacity for dissent vanishes, so does democracy. Patriotism, therefore, regards the venerable culture of the nation—everything from flags to monuments to songs to national rituals—as public articulations of a founding contract that includes dissent as a fundamental democratic value.68 This contract need not be invested solely in a civil religion that sacralizes the state, as Rousseau claimed. Patriotic citizens of a democracy like that of the United States recognize the capacity of cultural forms to function in political discourse as symbols, as devices that underscore liberty by maintaining the character of esteemed symbols rather than becoming anything that is sacred in itself. As symbols they will preserve access to public discourse, participation in the public sphere, which can thrive only when dissent and difference are possible. Patriotism is dedication to the principles on which the state is founded and which are exemplified in the individuals, events, and institutions that endorse, conceive, and maintain those principles.

Nationalism, by contrast, installs the flag and other objects and places in a national cult in which reverence of the emblems is understood to secure the nation as an earthly expression of divine will and therefore as a domain that cannot allow dissent. The nation itself is thought to be sacramentally deposited in forms that must be regarded as sacred and holy. Such a view will refuse to distinguish between explicitly religious objects, such as the Bible or the Cross, and the American flag. The flag becomes a national icon, serving like the Bible in the public school as the object of public veneration. Nationalism sacralizes such objects as the flag in order to put them to use in a coercive campaign to eliminate differences that are taken as a menace to uniformity. The only hope for national survival, according to nationalism, consist of interpreting unity as uniformity. Othing is crucial to this enterprise, and the corporate veneration of national icons casts love of nation in religious terms: those who do not worship the national deity are infidels. The "other" of nationalism is the stranger, alien, foreigner, outsider, unassimilated immigrant, savage, or aboriginal. The other of nonenlightenment nationalism is as a troubled state as well as one's own failure to realize one's inalienable rights. Such patriotism faces the openness and contingency of the social compact and regards the nation as a willed, historical, mutable construction that requires effort and sacrifice in order to flourish. Nationalism thinks in images of destiny
Catholicism and Nationhood

If the American majority was not inclined to distinguish patriotism from nationalism, litigation over the preservation of religious liberty in the first half of the twentieth century helped to do so. One could be a patriotic American without espousing the nationalist view of the (Protestant) majority. Through generations of court cases contesting Protestant hegemony, Catholics and other religious groups challenged the implicit identification of Protestant interests with state and federal government. Catholics themselves engaged in an internal debate over the persistence of individual ethnicities versus adoption of a single, modern, American Catholic identity. Despite the desire of some to cordon off the church from American culture and adopt an antagonistic stance toward national history and engagement with the society, many Catholic literati searched for a way to make America their own. The 1920s and 1930s proved a pivotal period by witnessing the decline of older styles of mainstream Protestantism and the assimilation of Catholicism into full engagement with American society. Perceived by many Protestants as the national religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Protestantism, not surprisingly, would suffer a loss of prestige when economic and social conditions became especially difficult during the 1930s.Court cases from the mid-1920s through the early 1940s confirmed the loss of Protestantism's privileged status by recognizing the rights of Catholics to operate their own schools (1925) and of Jehovah's Witnesses to refuse to recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag (1943). Intimately identified with American civil religion and the national ethos, Protestantism found its theological and cultural authority suffering the same crisis of faith as the nation.

At the same time, however, many Roman Catholic writers, artists, editors, and educators advanced an optimistic, idealistic vision of America in which they saw a unity of Catholic faith and national identity. Some among the Catholic intelligentsia even claimed to show that American democracy was indebted to Catholic intellectual tradition and that Catholicism was really "the mother of democracy," in the words of one enthusiast. The irony is noteworthy, since this came at the end of a century of Protestant anxieties about the incompatibility of democracy and "popery." But nineteenth-century nativism had declined markedly, the resurgence of such bigotry as the Ku Klux Klan notwithstanding. In the wake of World War I, which had served to insert Roman Catholics into the American fold by virtue of their participation in national defense and the demonstration of their loyalty to the nation, more and more Catholics began to think of themselves as comfortably American and discerned in the American heritage a substantial debt to Catholic thought. Indeed, in the midst of Protestant internal divisions and increasingly conflicted vision in the 1920s and 1930s, many Catholics came to regard themselves, in the words of one Catholic convert, as "the sole heirs by default, to this traditional vision... embodied in our Constitution."

In this triumphal vision of their national identity and mission, American Catholics were able to see themselves as quintessentially American. This idea was monumentalized in the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, whose construction began in 1920 on the campus of Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. The
Conception, a doctrine formally proclaimed church dogma in 1854 by Pius IX, who stands in full papal regalia beside Mary, presenting her to those gathered before the image. An aged Indian chief bends a respectful knee in acknowledgment of the patroness of the United States, while women and children draw near and tend to the flowers and American flag that accompany the Virgin’s apparition. The central motif, borrowed from Venetian paintings of Mary from the sixteenth century, is flanked on one side by the U.S. Capitol building and on the other by the future edifice of the National Shrine itself. The image announces with triumphal and devotional fervor that Mary, totem of Roman Catholicism, has made her way officially to the United States and established her cult in the nation’s capital. Once again, as with earlier Protestant visions, state and church intermingle, blurring the constitutional distinction of the two. Moreover, wittingly or not, the Catholic image redeploys the visual rhetoric that had once expressed the optimistic ambitions of nineteenth-century Protestant postmillennialism evident in figure 66. The American Tract Society had produced numerous versions of this sort of image, which valorized the American Protestant missionary preaching to an audience gathered about him or, in figure 66, the national unity and Protestant identity dedicated to a purpose no less glorious than ushering in the final age of humanity. Protestants had imagined a national mission of America as a millennium agent. By the 1920s, Catholic Americans were prepared to assume the cause as part of their national acculturation, which amounted to a partial rescripting of American history, a discernment of the latent influence of Catholic thought in the American past, and an appropriation of erstwhile Protestant enthusiasm. The nation imagined in figure 69 intermingled the old dream of prenational Christendom with the new polity of the American state, providing a bridge to the imagined community of American nationalism for American Catholics. The National Shrine would ground the two forms of imagined community in the same space, leaving to future generations of faithful the task of sorting out the conflicting allegiances that an image such as figure 69 left unarticulated.

The Face of Consensus: Mid-Twentieth Century and the Image of Jesus

Having come to see themselves as good Americans and, no less important, having been accepted as such by non-Catholic Americans, Roman Catholics by midcentury even displayed the same picture of Jesus in their homes as American Protestants did. Indeed, although Protestants
and Catholics alike assumed that Warner Sallman’s *Head of Christ* (see fig. 39) was their own faction’s image, more noteworthy was that the image belonged exclusively to no sect. As an image that appealed to both Protestant and Catholic subcultures, this picture of Jesus was used to redirect the nineteenth-century crusade to make the United States a *Protestant* nation toward a twentieth-century campaign to promote the United States as a *Christian* nation. During World War II, Sallman’s *Head of Christ* was distributed as a nonsectarian image of Christ among American servicemen in Europe and Asia through the United Services Organization (USO) by the YMCA and the Salvation Army. The filial piety of Jesus, gazing reverently to heaven and bearing an expression of solemn, self-effacing submission to his father’s will, also characterized the proper attitude of self-sacrifice encouraged by the government during the war. A poster from 1942 (fig. 70) shows a young woman receiving her commission as a nurse from the descending hands of the national deity, Uncle Sam, whose sleeves carry the national colors.

Bestowing a vocation to serve, these hands enter the visual field in the same manner as the ancient symbol of the biblical deity, the hand of God, occluding his fuller person in conformity to the piety of Jewish and Christian monotheism, but reaching in nevertheless to direct the pious soul to the national task of service. In a striking instance of American civil religion, the poster avoids sectarian iconography without in any way forfeiting the dominant American religious ethos of Christianity and Judaism. While the call to service and self-sacrifice in the face of war is hardly unique to Protestant, Catholic, or Jew, the similarity of the submissive nurse in the poster to Sallman’s Jesus and the poster’s stark difference from alternative visualizations of wartime women in American popular culture, such as Rosie the Riveter, suggest an alignment with the three major faiths of midcentury United States. Without being one or another of the traditions, the poster can draw from the common features of each and deliver its message as especially compelling: the call to serve the nation comes with a solemnity and authority that is unmistakable. The poster seems to suggest that the call to serve transfigures the individual into a kind of type: the white-clad, finely appointed, and beautifully presented nurse, a gleaming archetype of femininity whose task is to obey male authority and respond to the prompting of the nation-god.

Following the war, Sallman’s imagery was put to more aggressively exclusivist use. A Lutheran businessman in Indiana undertook a project called “Christ in Every Purse.” His aim was to distribute wallet-sized versions of the *Head of Christ* as widely as possible. The businessman contrasted the need for “card-carrying Christians” to the threat of “card-carrying Communists.” His campaign continued through the 1950s and into the 1960s as cold war anticommunism gripped America. A similar, yet historically ironic development took shape in Oklahoma in the late 1940s and 1950s as Ora O’Riley, a Choctaw Indian and Roman Catholic, led a local campaign to make her hometown of Durant, Oklahoma, the only city in the United States to display a picture of Christ in every home and public building. Whereas nineteenth-century evangelical publications often pictured Protestant missionaries at work among Native American communities (see fig. 64), O’Riley returned the favor in the mid-twentieth century as a Roman Catholic and Indian placing Christian images in the public spaces of her town in eastern Oklahoma, where the Choctaw nation had migrated in the late eighteenth century, after a colonial history of alliance with the French and enmity with the British. In 1949 O’Riley persuaded a district judge
to hang a copy of Sallman’s *Head of Christ* in his courtroom in Durant. Soon the image was proudly placed in the local municipal court, city hall, the fire department, and the chamber of commerce. In 1962 the city of Durant was pleased to have an autographed copy of Sallman’s picture accepted by Vice President Lyndon Johnson, who posed in a publicity photo gazing reverentially at the picture of Jesus (fig. 71).69

Why was Sallman’s image the one to be so widely distributed, avidly received, and ecumenically approved of by diverse Christian groups—from Catholic to Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, and even Mormon? Surely its nonsectarian portrayal helped. Sallman created an image that avoided the specificity of any denomination and combined with that a direct appeal to the pietistic inwardness that corresponded to a dominant strand of popular evangelical Protestant belief. At the same time, the image’s soft demeanor registered among Catholics as a devout portrayal of the Savior that comport ed visually with the mass-produced images of saints so popular on holy cards before the reforms installed by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) consign ed them (at least for many younger Catholics) to an embarrassing and Old World past. Moreover, in the midst and then the wake of World War II, Americans experienced what was doubtless the last moment in the twentieth century when Christianity could represent a broad national consensus. If the national star of Protestantism had dimmed, the war did much to stoke the flames of Christian piety and national fervor, and Sallman’s image of Jesus, more than any other, became the emblem of a national Christianity, a generic religion that served in a period of national crisis to evoke the pieties of hearth and home and patriotic cultus. The ascendency of this face of Jesus, which avoids the paraphernalia of divinity and stresses his human submission of his father’s mission, may mark what sociologist Will Herberg hailed as the tripartite religion of America in mid-twentieth century in his widely noted book, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*. Herberg described the social function of religion in American life: being Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish had become for Americans the “specific way . . . of being an American and locating oneself in American society.”70 Protestantism was no longer the sole official, national religion of the United States but one of the three official ways in which Americans understood their national identity as Americans. Sallman’s picture of Jesus was accepted by many Protestants and Catholics as the image of their savior and widely recognized by many Jews, no doubt, as the Christian savior. But the image also served as a very familiar symbol of American piety. Local chapters of the American Legion used the image to publicize that organization’s “Back to God” campaign in 1955, which President Eisenhower helped inaugurate with an address in which he asserted that belief in a supreme being was the “first, the most basic, expression of Americanism. Without God, there could be no American form of government, nor an American way of life.”71 It didn’t matter what particular supreme being that might be, only that one had belief in it. Yet Herberg suggested that Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism collectively constituted this “way of life” for Americans. Although he warned that such culture-religion lacked the prophetic voice of genuine biblical faith, Herberg insisted that the “American Way of Life” was a real religious sensibility, what he called a “civic religion,” that bound Americans together into a middle-class ethos.72 For many Americans but not all, Sallman’s Jesus visually expressed this ethos and national identity, placing a Christian face on America. The image was able to signify simultaneously the nonsectarian...
consensus of faith at midcentury in the nationalist civil religion and the sectarian beliefs of groups as disparate as Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics. The Head of Christ silently assured American Christians that the "supreme being" of the national religion was Jesus Christ. Once again, a symbol became an icon and infused patriotism with the religious fervor of nationalism.

The cold war-era campaign to place pictures of Jesus in public buildings marched in step with the infusion of theological language in the Pledge of Allegiance but was perhaps an even more obvious attempt to turn the clock back to the days of the Bible in the classroom. The need for certainty in an atmosphere of panic and fear could express itself in the paranoia of McCarthyism and, less fanatically and more prosaically, in the impulse to secure public spaces and institutions as well as children under the protective presence of the nation's totem. In 1968 a copy of Sallman's familiar picture of Jesus was hung in the hallway of a Michigan public high school to commemorate a beloved secretary. It remained there without comment until 1992, when a student objected to its presence and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed suit on the student's behalf in federal court, charging violation of the constitutional separation of church and state, since the local school board supported the superintendent's refusal to remove the picture. After receiving an offer of assistance from evangelist Pat Robertson's 700 Club, the school board agreed to accept legal defense free of charge from the conservative Rutherford Institute of Charlottesville, Virginia, an evangelically sympathetic, private legal foundation committed to promoting freedom of religion. In an attempt to conceal the particularist aspect of the image's meaning for Christians, the school's lawyer argued that the image did not endorse a particular religion but represented Jesus as a historical figure and therefore served a secular purpose rather than a religious one in the public school. Frequent editorials in local newspapers contended that removing the image contradicted the principles enshrined in the Constitution by the founding fathers. "Our country," as one editorials wrote, "is founded on the principles of God and the morals He teaches through the Bible, his recorded word." The ACLU maintained that the image offended the agnostic student by promoting Christianity.

In a nineteen-page decision, district court judge Benjamin Gibson rejected the school's argument and ruled in favor of the plaintiff, stating that "the true objective [of the image's display] is to promote religion...in general and Christianity in particular." Gibson also found that the defendants' "declaration that the picture is displayed as an artistic work or that it is a depiction of a historical figure does not blind this Court to the religious message necessarily conveyed by the portrayal of one who is the object of veneration and worship by the Christian faith." Supporters of the school board ritualistically cloaked the image (fig. 72) in a red shroud produced by a local women's group and cheered successive attempts at appeal all the way to the United States Supreme Court, which, on May 1, 1995, announced its decision not to hear the case, letting stand the appellate decision to support Gibson's ruling. When the image was finally removed, local clergy led
prayer as supporters wept. School officials left in place of the image the shroud that had covered it. In following days students pinned picture buttons of Jesus to the shroud, but these were removed shortly after the ACLU threatened to take the school district back to court.77

The story sketched in this chapter turns on the recurring recourse some Americans have made to religious visual culture in order to respond to the perceived instability of their democracy. The story moves from the antebellum use of mass-produced images to create a Protestant nation by converting others to the dominant Protestant culture, to the emergence of a national Catholic identity, then to a generic Christian view following World War II (the face of which was Sallman’s Head of Christ), to the ironic “return of the other” during the cold war period in a crusade conducted by a Native American and Roman Catholic to reclaim the nation for Christianity; it ends in the recent and decisive rejection of the placement of a mass-produced picture of Jesus in a public space, however generic or putatively “historical” that Jesus may be claimed to appear.

In each episode, images—whether pictures of Jesus or ritualized, legally sacralized flags—served as the means for dispersing influence in a nation for which any religious definition of national identity could only be voluntary and not endorsed by the state. In each case the subtle but significant transformation of patriotism into nationalism is evident in the symbols and paraphernalia of an American nationalist cultus. Until the Bloomingdale case, however, no case law stipulated that images of religious figures constitute a coercive or influential effect. What is significant in the Bloomingdale case is that the judicial system affirmed the tendency it had been developing since midcentury: it is no longer inclined to accept the argument of a prevailing religious ethos. In the court’s view, images, as elusive as their signification may be, can unambiguously endorse religion when prominently displayed under the auspices of the state. Clearly, this is something that sectors of American Protestantism have believed all along. That the judicial system has caught up with them, however, is no indication that Christians will forsake the currency of images in the quest for an elusive national identity. The recent refusal of a state supreme court chief justice in Alabama to remove a sculpture of the Ten Commandments from a state court house (not unlike a granite version of Benjamin Rush’s tract illustration reproduced here as figure 63) is proof that the old argument is not yet over. In fact, suits in as many as fourteen states were filed in the summer of 2003 concerning the display of the Ten Commandments on public lands or in government buildings.78 The prevalence of images of sacrifice, self-denial, saintly courage, communal solidarity, and memorial enshrinement suggest that religion and its mass-culture icons remain for Americans one of the most powerful components of their experience of nationhood.