

“I Hear America Singing”: The Relationship Between American Religion and Democratic Values in Whitman’s Leaves of Grass

by David Mudd

Ezra Pound, one of America’s most famous poets despite his confused relationship with the country, once declared that above all Walt Whitman was “America’s poet...He *is* America” (Pound). Whitman’s work warrants such high praise; since 1855, readers and writers everywhere have recognized his poetry as some of the most important ever produced on the American continents, representing an important break from the more traditional poetry of structured meter in the first steps towards modernism. Whitman’s influence on American writers is no less palpable. Alongside Pound, literary critic Harold Bloom cites Whitman as the precursor and forebear of Allen Ginsberg, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Pablo Neruda, and William Carlos Williams, declaring him the “center of the American canon” (Bloom 248). While his groundbreaking status in poetry is somewhat overstated, Whitman’s poetic innovations were just as important to the American tradition as the remarkable image of that culture he painted, called by Kenneth Rexroth, “the last and greatest vision of the American potential” (qtd. in Rorty 17). This vision, part of an Enlightenment tradition he was both working inside of and responding to, has continued to influence the liberal democratic political culture he inhabited. Whitman’s occupations and status were fitting for someone Henry David Thoreau described as “apparently the greatest democrat the world has ever seen” (qtd. in Kateb 19). Gone were the leisure-class poets of the British tradition; Whitman was a man of the people. As a journalist, he sought out the stories and the everyday goings-on amongst the people of New York City, and his poems reflect this inclination towards community, glorifying the common people and the many confusing multitudes that flowed around him. It was a fitting topic for a man whose internal conflict and contradictory identity he frequently hid behind the persona of “Walt Whitman, a kosmos.” Most likely, this was in no small part to conceal a sexual orientation that would cause the public to

revile him. But it is precisely these multitudes, his internal contradictions, his dialectic of merging and becoming that make him such an emblematic figure for a frequently contradictory and often embattled, but essentially democratic, society.

These characteristics, universal throughout his work, speak to a broader culture of American exceptionalism that celebrates the triumph of democracy and looks forward towards its role in changing the world. Whitman’s attitude towards America and its role in the world has firm roots in the American self-identity that many Americans buy into to a greater or lesser degree. Americans reading his work can experience the same transcendent feelings of celebration and the inherent virtue of republican government in much the same manner as Memorial Day celebrations, Independence Day fireworks, and grandiose paintings of the Founding Fathers or the Battle of Gettysburg. Lacking a better word to describe the sensation, this “tingly” feeling of heightened emotional awareness and increased connection recalls the power of religious solemnities.

The connection between American identity and quasi-religious symbolism is more than simply circumstantial. Robert Bellah, a monumental figure in the sociology of religion, famously declared that in America there exists “alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion” (Bellah 1). The idea of civil religion is originally Rousseau’s, where in *The Social Contract* he wrote that “the dogmas of the civil religion ought to be simple...the existence of a powerful, intelligent, beneficent, foresighted, and providential divinity; the afterlife; the happiness of the just; the punishment of the wicked; the sanctity of the social contract and its laws” as well as religious tolerance, or rather the exclusion of intolerance (Rousseau 102). In this way, “religion can also be divided into two types, namely the religion of man and that of the citizen” (99). Civil religion is not a religion in the sense of Christianity or Islam,

but rather, civic life and engagement take on quasi-religious features. Phillip Hammond suggests we revise the term "civil religion" and instead use the term "legitimizing myth" (Hammond 20), which suggests that the concept serves as a way for a nation to legitimize itself as a nation to both its citizens and to other nations. Rousseau, however, was not writing for the new democratic age of which Whitman chants. Bellah, in his landmark "Civil Religion in America," notes the uniqueness of the American experience, writing that "at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people" (12). He further writes that "What we have, then, from the earliest years of the republic is a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity" (8).

To substantiate these claims, he looks to famous documents in American history to prove this, noting that such things as the Declaration of Independence, Washington's Farewell Address, and numerous inaugurations make use of common themes such as egalitarianism, supplications to a generalized divine power, and the like to legitimize themselves. The painting *The Apotheosis of Washington* (located in the Capitol rotunda), for example, depicts the first president alongside the goddesses of Victory and Law in much the same way Michelangelo painted the creation of Adam. The blending of Greek, Roman, and Christian imagery communicates his importance as father of the nation as well as the values that he, and through him the nation, embody. Similarly, in the aftermath of two failed attempts to march from Selma to Montgomery in protest of disenfranchisement, Lyndon B. Johnson convened a Joint Session of Congress to declare:

Rarely are we met with the challenge, not to our growth or abundance, or our welfare or our society—but rather to the values and the purposes and the meaning of our beloved nation...and should we double our wealth and conquer the stars and still be unequal to this issue, then we will have failed as a people and as a nation... Above the pyramid on the great seal of the United States it says in Latin, "God has favored our undertaking." (Johnson)

President Johnson's evocation of American destiny as inseparable from the need for a just society in the sight of God and men was certainly effective. In the case of Johnson's speech, George Pauley notes that civil religion allows the President to assume the role of national prophet/priest, providing a powerful framework for political oratory as interpreting national destiny (Pauley 186). Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reportedly told Johnson that the speech was "the most moving eloquent unequivocal and passionate plea for human rights ever made by any president of this nation" (189). American civil religion then appears as a common theme or running thread, a civil glue that binds the country together into a nation united for a common end.

Of important note is that American civil religion does not glorify the power of a few naturally born aristocrats as the benevolent, providential divinity of the State reigning supreme in the Hobbesian sense; rather, it is the power of the common man and the democratic masses that is exalted above all. In his essay "Democratic Vistas," Whitman writes that "I shall use the words America and democracy as convertible terms" (Whitman 758). Throughout much of his work, Whitman demonstrates the same breed of thought emblematic of Bellah's hypothesized civil religion, or legitimizing myth, constructing America in a quasi-religious light to create a new reality that uplifts and sanctifies the entirety of the nation. By intertwining the two, Whitman creates the same kind of pride that the civil religion instills, creating a firm sense of national unity necessary to the well-being of a country. Richard Rorty writes that Whitman "wanted Americans to take pride in what America might, all by itself and by its own lights, make of itself" (Rorty 16). Additionally, Kenneth Rexroth writes that he invented the idea of "the realization of the American Dream as an apocalypse, an eschatological event which would give the life of man its ultimate significance (qtd. in Rorty 16). Whitman positions America primarily as a "teeming Nation of nations" ("By Blue Ontario's Shore" 61) that will lead the charge in the creation of a new world, a democratic world made for the common man and not the feudal aristocrat. In doing so, he wholeheartedly buys into the same way of thinking that Bellah says defines American public discourse. That is, establishing America as

the iconic "city on the hill," a beacon for the Old World to look to, first among nations, tasked with—as Woodrow Wilson put it—making the world "safe for democracy" (Wilson). It is this triumph of democracy over the chains of aristocracy that legitimates America and gives it purpose as a nation. The "intelligent, providential divinity" that Rousseau spoke of becomes not a God so stripped of specificity as to become unrecognizable but democracy itself, a system of governance that elevates man's capacities to new, higher levels. Following this line of thinking, those who relentlessly support liberal democratic freedoms become the "just," and any who would challenge the Union (such as by seceding) become the blasphemous wicked. In Whitman's line of thinking, democratic union is a sacred act that creates a new, higher reality for all of mankind and breeds a new kind of "democratic individual."

This process of democracy creating new, better citizens of the world takes the figure of speech "body politic" to new levels; his poem "By Blue Ontario's Shore" best exemplifies this attitude. In section six of that poem, he writes of a single individual, a representative American, lifting "to the light a west-bred face" (65). The speaker describes how various aspects of the country, including cities, history, and rivers become "vocal" and "[spend] themselves lovingly in him...stretching with them North or South" (74-77). This individual is not an elite aristocrat but a representative of the democratic masses who subsumes all into a national identity. The kinship between the individual and the landscape makes him into the physical manifestation of the will of the country and her people as a function of the intermingling pluralism inherent to democracy. This process happens within a decidedly religious framework. At the start of the poem, a "Phantom gigantic superb" appears to the speaker, instructing him to "Chant me the poem that comes from the soul of America, chant me the carol of victory, / And strike up marches of Libertad, marches more powerful yet, / And sing me before you go the song of the throes of Democracy" (2-5). Whitman creates his own political commissioning that echoes the religious stories of God's appearance to Abram as well as the Virgin Mary and the Prophet Muhammed, each foretelling new political realities. Whitman places himself in line with these figures using the same religious

imagery of divine commissioning, only his god is not divinity but democracy, the "destin'd conqueror" (6). Continuing the religious context, the use of a single deific personage to represent the entirety of the land is suggestive of a more naturalistic religion; democracy is a simple consequence of America's character.

In Whitman's conception, the common citizenry is as equally inseparable from the soul of America as democracy. This represents a major departure from the philosophy of absolutist European monarchies, best summed by King Louis XIV's declaration, "I am the State." In "I Hear America Singing," the speaker writes, "I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear, / Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong," and continues, describing the work of carpenters, masons, sailors, farmers, and even the domestic work of the 19th-century wife and mother (1-8). The speaker directly acknowledges that the song of America is one of "varied carols," consisting of the sum of its inhabitants. These inhabitants are not aristocrats, feudal lords, or the bourgeoisie, but commoners of all genders and walks of life. He echoes this sentiment again in section twenty-four of "Song of Myself" where Whitman dramatically declares:

Through me the afflatus surging and surging,
through me the current and index
I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign
of democracy,
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot
have their counterpart of on the same terms.
Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generation of
prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseas'd and despairing and of
thieves and dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
And of the threads that connect the stars, and of
wombs and of the father-stuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down
upon (505-513)

By describing the "afflatus" surging through him, the speaker positions himself as a conduit from which "the sign of democracy" pours out unto the world, that sign entwined with the "many long dumb

voices" that form the bedrock of the country. Here again, Whitman adopts the same prophetic persona that he exhibits in the preceding poems, which he goes to great lengths to create in "Song of Myself." The society that he envisions is one of profound democratic egalitarianism, echoing the same calls for equality and freedom common in public political discourse. As the prophet of democratic society, it is through him that the "many long dumb voices" are heard, voices of prisoners, slaves, the impoverished, those whose rights are ignored. He envisions a world of perfect equality of opportunity, invoking the divine to declare that he will accept nothing if everyone cannot have the same, a core tenet of liberal democratic thought.

This equality can be seen in the symbol of the "leaves of grass" in "Song of Myself." Here the speaker describes it as "a uniform hieroglyphic, / And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones, / Growing among black folks as among white, / Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive them the same" (106-109). Understanding the grass as a symbol, the speaker notes its democratizing force: it grows everywhere equally regardless of race, origin, or station. Jane Bennett agrees with this sentiment. She uses Whitman's image of the sun from the 1855 preface where he writes that the poet "judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing" (620) to describe his politics. With this perspective, the poet can "apprehend the outside with equanimity" to detect the voices of many different sources and incorporate them into the democratic self (Bennett 138). The solar perspective allows the poet to embrace the commonality of the individual as a key part of society, crafting a landscape of intermingling threads (133). Through democracy, every man is equal just as the sun radiates down from above equally, embracing rich and poor, black and white, slave and free with identical fervor.

Through this process of merging and equalizing, Whitman attempts to unify the nation into a single democratic aggregate of all persons expressed equally at the same time. He was quite clear that this was the intention, writing that "*Leaves of Grass*, already published, is, in its intentions, the song of a great composite *Democratic Individual*, male or female" (172-173). By doing so, he positions the

legitimizing myth of America as the eventual victory of democracy and the creation of a new democratic world with America as its beacon. George Kateb says that what makes this "transcendence of democratic culture" democratic is the "philosophical self-respect" it encourages in its citizens. "Democratic culture," he continues, "therefore opens the possibility for each to take himself or herself seriously as directly connected to whatever is irreducible, to that around which the mind can never close" (Kateb 44). Freed from shackles of hierarchy to embrace the "irreducible" existence of freedom, democratic persons are free to engage in building a world charged with democratic virtue through everyday action. Through these actions and political participation, Americans cultivate a kind of "republican virtue," or "the ability of an individual to rise above personal or class interest to place the good of the whole community above one's own" (Ball and Dagger 23). This virtue is necessary to enable the creation of national unity so that the democratic aims of the legitimizing myth might be accomplished. In American civil religion, pursuit of liberty is a transformative act that breeds holiness and creates new persons by bestowing them with civic virtue; it is this tradition that Whitman taps into and promulgates with his poetry.

However, Whitman's mystical musings on democratic individuals and the relationships between them are only one way of understanding the civil religion and its innate ties to the events that shaped the nation's history. Bellah outlines two periods of American history as "times of trial" undeniably crucial to development of American history. Out of these periods emerge the "major symbols of the American civil religion" (12). What these are should be particularly clear: the American Revolution and the Civil War, the latter being the most important. The conflicts also gave us two of our greatest saints, and Bellah, true to the Judeo-Christian framework the American mythos writes itself in, figures George Washington as a kind of "American Moses" who led his people out of the bondage in the British Empire. But if Washington is the American Moses, then Abraham Lincoln is the American Christ, the martyr who sacrificed himself so that the sins of the nation might be redeemed. It is significant, then, that Whitman lived through the "War Between the States," which, along with the assassination of

President Lincoln, had an incredible impact on him. Moved by patriotic duty, he volunteered as a nurse, where he had a firsthand, immediate view of the conflict and its consequences, serving as another muse for his poetry.

One of religion's primary functions is to help understand our relationship with inevitable death. In the context of civil religion, this can be seen at Arlington National Cemetery, one of the most important places in the national capitol and certainly one of the most emotionally powerful. The Civil War, which Whitman witnessed, provided an unparalleled number of deaths for Americans to cope with. Over the course of four years, roughly 620,000 were killed, more than the American lives lost in both World Wars, Vietnam, and Korea combined. That total amounts to more than 2% of the population at the time (Civil War Trust). In keeping with this, American civil religion attempts to find ways of understanding why so many died and coping with their loss. Julia Ward Howe, in "Battle Hymn of the Republic," expressed this in writing, "as He died to make men holy, / let us die to make men free" (Howe). Whitman's poetry is no different; we see the same attempts to mourn and legitimize the deaths of so many young men. Ed Folsom notes the two-fold purpose of Whitman's poetry in its relationship with America. Before the war, it serves as a method of examining American identity and teaching Americans to celebrate diversity and contradictions. After, it attempts to catalog the seemingly endlessly accumulating deaths (Folsom 73).

In "Pensive on Her Dead Gazing," Whitman demonstrates one method of legitimizing their deaths. Setting the stage, the speaker says that "pensive on her dead gazing I heard the Mother of All" (1). The speaker positions himself in a religious sense, only as a mystic hearing the true nature of things instead of as a prophet; in this case, he listens to the ceaseless mourning of the "Mother of All." This being charges the earth to "My dead absorb—my young men's beautiful bodies absorb—and their precious, precious, precious blood; / Which holding in trust for me, faithfully back again give me, many a year hence" (10-11). This maternal figure, mother of the many slain American citizens, mirrors his feminine depiction of democracy as "ma femme"; democracy is not just a political relationship but a

loving, maternal one. By eloquently describing the trickling of "precious blood" down the mountain side and into the trees only to return in the "blowing airs from the fields," Whitman makes room for the soldiers and incorporates them into his cycle of death and rebirth. This rebirth has new meaning in the context of American Christianity; through Christ, "all life and death are an endless cycle" in a kind of "democratic communion" (Folsom 76). Here, the war-dead are metaphorically reborn within the context of the civil religion as the very essence of the land itself, a land Whitman has already demonstrated the need for in his political vision. By stressing rebirth, Whitman creates a meaning for their dying, transforming their "torn bodies" (2) into "immortal heroes" (14) who died so that the nation might continue, making their dying a "sweet death" (17) and consecrating the very land itself.

This imagery of America being metaphorically baptized in blood can be found in possibly the most famous ten sentences in American history: the Gettysburg Address. Like Johnson, Lincoln connects equality and freedom with national success, describing the Civil War as "testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure" (Lincoln 183). Like Whitman, Lincoln turns the conflict from such earthly political questions like state's rights into a sublime contest of freedom, transforming nameless infantrymen into patriotic martyrs. Like the trickling blood which purifies the land, Lincoln evocatively declares that "we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract" (183). Like a priest, he finishes by issuing a commissioning to the living present, saying that "we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth" (183). This speech spoke to the core of American legitimating myth; it is part of the reason that Bellah would refer to Lincoln as the "American Christ."

To be Christ-like entails death for a higher purpose; in the aftermath of Lincoln's assassination, Whitman would again try to make sense of his death

in the context of religious dedication. Parkinson writes that, in this context, "the figure of Lincoln has symbolic stature that extends beyond the merely personal, and it is so that Whitman sees his death, not that of one alone but that of the sacrificial participants of the civil war" (Parkinson 1). The process of mourning is best seen in Whitman's great elegy, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Like "By Blue Ontario's Shore," the religious allusions of the poem are obvious from the very beginning of the poem, with the image of "the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night" (Whitman 2) recalling the Star of Bethlehem. Narrating Lincoln's funeral procession, Whitman places a special emphasis on the surrounding landscape that evokes "the thought of him I love," describing the land as both "body and soul" (89). Throughout the poem, the relationship between the landscape and the essence of the nation again becomes intertwined, the body and soul respectively, as the passing of America's greatest martyr causes Whitman to look to the land and the people to understand and cope with death. The speaker calls the death that looms over the land "sane and sacred" (48), as Lincoln's purported sacrifice has immortalized him as the soldier's heroism sanctified Gettysburg. As the poem continues, the image of "him I love" becomes increasingly mixed with Whitman's memories of all the dead of the war, writing that he "saw battle-corpses, myriads of them, / And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them, / I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war, / ... / They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not" (177-180). The thought of Lincoln merges into the whole of the dead, becoming one with the composite democratic individual, their deaths sanctifying the soil of these states and whose blood bound the Union together (Parkinson 12). Lincoln appears as the last and greatest of these martyrs. This process allows Whitman's mourning to be at last complete. He finishes:

Passing the visions, passing the night,
Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades'
hands,
Passing the song of the hermit bird and the
tallying song of my soul,
Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying
ever-altering song, ...

Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped
leaves,
I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming,
returning with spring.

I cease from my song for thee (Whitman 185-
189, 193-195)

The repeated "passing" suggests that the pain of death has passed on, beyond "the visions" and "the night," leaving the dead in the dooryard to continuously be reborn in spring, at rest in the cycle of life and death. This cycle is firmly rooted in civil religion, providing a meaning for both the dead and those who still linger. Lincoln's death, and the deaths of all the soldiers, are here understood in the context of what they have done for the country, ensuring that "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth" (Lincoln 183).

While the relevance of both Lincoln and Whitman's political vision should, in today's political climate, become quite clear, its use is much more complicated. Whitman's central position in the American canon makes this vision particularly important in the shifting political landscape, as the winds of nationalism and populism rise at home and abroad. However, as other thinkers have noted, the literary form Whitman uses to communicate his message does not easily enable a transition into making discrete, specific policy proposals. Nor do the reputation of figures like Washington or Lincoln that civil religion creates live up to historical scrutiny. At the same time that George Washington took his place amongst the gods, he owned a sizable population of slaves; Lincoln, too, was a ruthless pragmatist who wrote that "if I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it" (Lincoln 44). The same goes for Whitman; Terrel Carver writes that we should steer well away from turning him into an icon, rightly noting that the poet's views on race, gender equality, and imperialism would all be considered offensive in a modern climate (Carver 223). He makes the same argument against "iconizing" democracy as well, noting its history of both promoting egalitarianism but also defending "traditional" institutions of monarchy, elitism, and discrimination (223-224). American history bears this out, with its genocide against Native Americans, Reagan-era toppling

of democratically-elected governments in Latin America, and a long history of both *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination against minorities that led to the civil rights movement. By framing a portrayal of Whitman in an iconized portrayal of democracy and America, there is little, Carver says, Whitman can tell us that we don't already know (225). Though Whitman's ideals are certainly religious in nature, it would be inaccurate to associate them exclusively with a particular religious tradition, especially in a country as steeped in Christianity as the United States. The ideals show a particular emphasis on moving beyond particular institutions in pursuit of a great democratic good in the immediate world rather than the next. While the danger of confirmation bias and of stripping Whitman's actual ideas down to meaningless rhetoric is indeed great, the romantic conception of American identity and potential as a force for good provides a welcome breath of fresh air in the modern political climate. Thus, Whitman-esque optimism can be an inspirational force that can encourage us to become engaged in the world in order to implement those democratic values.

William James and other pragmatists like Richard Rorty see room for Whitman, however. James thought that Whitman allows us to “forget the low in yourself, then, think only of the high ...[T]hrough angers, losses, ignorance, ennui” (qtd. in Malachuk 63). Instead of dwelling in the romantic world of ideals and absolute truths, James considers the poem as putting forth a method to improve the self. Daniel Malachuk notes that he, like Carver, argues against worshipping Whitman as an incredible icon (Malachuk 65). Optimism is key. He wrote that “with many men the question of life's worth is answered by a temperamental optimism which makes them incapable of believing that anything seriously evil can exist...Whitman's works are the standing text-book of this kind of optimism” (qtd. in Malachuk 64). The significant impact, then, is not whether Whitman accurately depicts reality, but what that depiction can do for us as a nation and people still striving to accomplish our aims. Both the civil religion and Whitman, despite their errancy, serve a role in helping us do this. Rorty writes that “just as too little self-respect makes it difficult to display moral courage, so insufficient national pride makes energetic and effective debate about national

policy unlikely” (Rorty 3). The optimism inherent in Whitman encourages political participation that allows us to accomplish the aims of the legitimating myth. At the same time, it allows us to cope with the loss of our dead, both historical and contemporary. This type of civic pride that Whitman so relentlessly promotes serves this role in political society. By providing a set of stories to tell ourselves, it gives us a sense of our place within the world, creating national unity and encouraging positive public participation. But, these stories and figures are a double-edged sword, and must be accompanied by a genuinely mature understanding of how these values of democracy and equality play out in a confusing and frequently contradictory world. Yet, in recognizing these contradictions and the work we have yet to do, perhaps we can glimpse what Whitman glimpsed so many years ago by blue Ontario's shore.

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