

## God in America, Episode 5: "Soul of a Nation"

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Good Shepherd Lutheran School of Lay Ministry Zoom Meeting discussion, Wednesday, March 25, 2020 6pm:

Topic: Alan Crowley's Zoom Meeting

Time: Mar 25, 2020 06:00 PM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

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### *Study Guide:*

SUMMARY In the post-World War II era, rising evangelist Billy Graham tried to inspire a religious revival that fused faith with patriotism in a Cold War battle with "godless communism." As Americans flocked in record numbers to houses of worship, nonbelievers and religious minorities appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court to test the constitutionality of religious expression in public schools, and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. emerged as a modern-day prophet, calling upon the nation to honor both biblical teachings and the founders' democratic ideals of equal justice.

## CHRISTIANITY AND COLD WAR AMERICA

On Sept. 23, 1949, President Truman informed the nation of a startling new development: the Soviet Union, America's ally in World War II, had exploded a nuclear device. Once a friend, the USSR was now a foe, and the threat of its nuclear capability shattered the postwar return to normalcy. The event was announced a few days before a little-known evangelist named Billy Graham was scheduled to launch a crusade in the city of Los Angeles, home to film stars, sex and sin. Graham seized the moment, positioning Christian America against "godless communism." He sought to save souls, but he also sought to save the nation.

As Graham barnstormed across the country, he combined Christianity and patriotism in a way that appealed to many people, including President Dwight Eisenhower, who urged Americans to attend church, adding that "our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is." At a huge rally in New York's Madison Square Garden, Vice President Richard Nixon shared the pulpit with Graham and reassured the audience: "I'm sure we all realize that one of the most basic reasons for American progress in the past and for our strength today is that from the time of our foundation we have had a deep and abiding faith in God."

But some Americans pushed back against this fusion of religion and patriotism. In Champaign, Ill., a self-described humanist, Vashti McCollum, challenged the widespread practice of "release time," when public school students were "released" from academic instruction and allowed to receive religious instruction on school grounds. Her case, *McCollum v. Board of Education*, eventually reached the Supreme Court. In 1948, in an 8-1 decision, the court ruled the practice unconstitutional. The ruling gave rise to howls of protest and created a lurking suspicion that the court harbored a secret hostility toward religion.

In 1962, the Supreme Court made another controversial ruling in *Engel v. Vitale*. Brought by five Long Island families of Jewish heritage, the case challenged the longstanding practice of prayer in public schools. The court found in favor of the plaintiffs, once again unleashing an avalanche of criticism. In the years that followed, the court ruled on Bible reading in public schools, a moment of silence in public schools, and displays of a Christmas crèche in a public courthouse. To its critics, the court appeared intent on

draining religious expression from public spaces. In fact, it was attempting to find a middle ground that protected religious minorities from unwanted expressions of and exposure to religious symbols and language.

In both the *McCullum* and *Engel* cases, Justice Hugo Black wrote the majority opinion. In *McCullum* he referred again to Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Baptist Association of Danbury, Conn. and repeated Jefferson's language about "a wall of separation between church and state," as well as the court's view that such a wall "must be kept high and impregnable." The court's decision in *McCullum* has been described as "the greatest single safeguard to separation of church and state outside the First Amendment itself." Read an excerpt from it:

Pupils compelled by law to go to school for secular education are released in part from their legal duty upon the condition that they attend religious classes. This is beyond all question a utilization of the tax-established and tax-supported public school system to aid religious groups to spread their faith, and it falls squarely under the ban of the First Amendment. ... To hold that a state cannot ... utilize its public school system to aid any or all religious faiths or sects in the dissemination of their doctrines and ideals does not, as counsel urges, manifest a governmental hostility to religion or religious teachings. A manifestation of such hostility would be at war with our national tradition as embodied in the First Amendment's guaranty of the free exercise of religion. For the First Amendment rests upon the premise that both religion and government can best work to achieve their lofty aims if each is left free from the other within its respective sphere.

"WHAT KIND OF AMERICA I BELIEVE IN"

On Sept. 12, 1960, Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy addressed the Greater Houston Ministerial Association in response to alarm over the prospect of a Catholic president. Evangelist Billy Graham worked behind the scenes to support a Protestant campaign against Kennedy and encourage influential Protestant ministers to endorse Republican candidate Richard Nixon. Just days before Kennedy spoke in Houston, Graham organized a gathering of ministers in Washington, D.C. presided over by prominent Protestant preacher Norman Vincent Peale.

The Houston address was a dramatic public moment in the 1960 campaign, and the sense was that Kennedy successfully "embraced his faith while specifically denying that it

would be a hindrance in carrying out the constitutional duties of the presidency," as one writer has put it. The candidate spelled out his view of the separation of church and state and addressed what historian Grant Wacker describes in this episode as "a historic Protestant fear that a Catholic president could not possibly be uncompromised in relation to the Vatican." Read excerpts from Kennedy's Houston speech:

"I believe in an American where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the president -- should he be Catholic -- how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the president who might appoint him or the people who might elect him. I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Jewish; where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the pope, the National Council of Churches, or any other ecclesiastical source; where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials; and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all. ... I am not the Catholic candidate for president. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for president, who happens also to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my church on public matters, and the church does not speak for me. ... But if the time should ever come -- and I do not concede any conflict to be even remotely possible -- when my office would require me to either violate my conscience or violate the national interest, then I would resign the office; and I hope any conscientious public servant would do the same.

"EQUAL SOULS, EQUAL VOTES" While the Supreme Court moved to circumscribe the place of religion in public schools and public spaces, faith fueled the movement for civil rights. Local activists had worked for years to pave the way, but the man who emerged as the chief spokesman for the movement was Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist preacher who had studied the teachings of Gandhi and developed his own philosophy of nonviolent resistance. Historians have called his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," written in April 1963, the tide-turning document of the civil rights movement and an eloquent summation of his political and theological philosophy. King aide Andrew Young wrote that "more than any

other document or statement, Martin's letter helped to lay a strong moral and intellectual basis not only for our struggle in Birmingham, but for all subsequent movement campaigns in the South. It has become a classic in American literature."

Near the end of his letter King asked: "What else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts, and pray long prayers?" Read an excerpt from the letter that includes King's famous statement about injustice:

"I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth-century prophets left their little villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid. Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

In his Oval Office speech to the nation on June 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy addressed civil rights as a moral issue that was "as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution." As historian Clayborne Carson points out in this episode, "That's precisely what King has been saying." Historian Frank Lambert underscores the point: "Martin Luther King did see America's founding documents as giving a voice, giving expression to fundamental biblical principles. We're all equal before God, says the Bible. All men are created equal, says the Declaration of Independence."

King always "put one foot in the Constitution and the other in scripture," according to author Taylor Branch, whose three-volume history of America in the King years explores religion's important role in the civil rights movement. King's oratory, writes Branch, "mined twin doctrines of equal souls and equal votes in the common ground on nonviolence."

Read an excerpt from Branch's book *Pillar of Fire* on how religion and democracy were intertwined in King's words and thoughts while he was in jail in Birmingham:

Invariably [King] pulled up hope in paired phrases of secular and religious faith. "We will win our freedom," he wrote, "because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands." No fewer than five times he called upon variants of "Constitutional and God-given rights" as the twin footing that grounded his outlook. There was something characteristically American about the notion of divine sanction for democratic values, but King's own struggle against despair pushed beliefs back to the earliest prophets of monotheism. Centuries before Plato, they introduced a deity that shockingly held kings and peasants to the same moral laws and rejected the forceful authority of state violence as evil. Their concept of equal souls anticipated and lifted up the democratic principle of universally equal votes. To hold the belief in justice among equal souls as the key to religious as well as political conviction seem at once crazy and noble, wildly improbable and starkly human. ... "One day the South will know," he concluded, "that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy..."

At the March on Washington on Aug. 28, 1963, thousands of civil rights workers and protestors gathered at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial to hear King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The moral urgency of the moment pushed John Kennedy to introduce a civil rights bill, eventually passed by Lyndon Johnson. King was euphoric, but he broke with Johnson over the Vietnam War, refusing to compromise his principles in order to retain his access to political power. By the time he was assassinated at age 39, King had assumed the mantle of an American prophet.

#### FOR DISCUSSION

How would you describe the role the Cold War played in the convergence of American religion and politics? How did religious and political leaders use Protestant Christianity to counter fears of communism, Catholics, and the national insecurities of the time?

Dwight Eisenhower was the first president to write and recite a prayer at his inauguration. He approved adding "one nation, under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance and "In God We Trust" to U.S. currency. What were the characteristics of Eisenhower-era religiosity?

What was evangelist Billy Graham's message to America, and how did it resonate in the '50s and '60s? How did he represent postwar evangelicalism?

Professor Stephen Prothero speaks of a "marriage" between religion and politics after World War II. Philip Goff says both Dwight Eisenhower and Billy Graham "marry" religion and democracy. Do you agree? Could the same also be said of Martin Luther King Jr.? What evidence or examples of such a close relationship between religion and democracy do you find in American history, in this episode, and in other episodes in the series? Philip Goff also says "religion is a sign of democracy" and "democracy is, in fact, a public expression basically of a deeply felt religion." What do you think? Is there a contradiction between the marriage of religion and democracy and the separation of church and state?

Professor Frank Lambert observes that the 1950s were a time of "reclaiming this notion that we're a chosen people," a dominant idea in America's self-understanding and one that recurs throughout God in America. How does the notion of a special mission and a special relationship with God come back into play in religion and politics during the Cold War? According to one sociologist of religion, "There has not been a generation since 1630 that has not understood Americans to be in some sense or other a chosen people." What do you think of this conclusion? How do you understand the meaning of Americans as "chosen people"?

How is the First Amendment tested in the stories in this episode? What is at issue in the two Supreme Court cases that are highlighted? Why did the court rule as it did? What events and circumstances in the larger world encouraged the court to move in the direction of protecting religious minorities?

Why was Vashti McCollum's legal case against the public schools of Champaign, Ill., viewed as such a threat? How do the stories of the McCollum family, the Long Island families in *Engel v. Vitale*, and their interactions with public education compare with the story earlier in the series of the immigrant Catholic families of New York and the efforts of Bishop John Hughes on behalf of the education of Catholic children?

How would you have decided the McCollum and Engel court cases? Why?

Do you agree with Professor Stephen Prothero that public schools "have always been a place where we inculcated this religious sensibility and where we made the connection between Christianity and morality and citizenship"? Should they be? Are there other sources of morality besides religion?

Why did some Protestants fear the prospect of a Catholic president? What did John F. Kennedy do to address their concerns, and what did he say to try to convince them otherwise? What relevance do you think the debates about religion in the 1960 presidential campaign have for politics today?

Analyze the moral vocabulary of Martin Luther King Jr. and the way he uses words such as freedom, righteousness, justice, and community. What meaning does he give them? What religious reasoning does he employ? How is his language different from the political discourse of the time?

"Throughout American history the main story we've gravitated toward has been the Exodus story," says Professor Stephen Prothero. What are the themes of the Exodus story, and where do you see them played out in the history of America and in the episodes of God in America?

A commitment to religiously rooted nonviolence was arguably the civil rights movement's most powerful tool for social reform. What became of nonviolent change after the death of Martin Luther King Jr., and why do nonviolent strategies seem to have disappeared?

The life, death and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., says Andrew Young, "point to the fact that this is a religious universe." What do you think he means by this? What is he saying about the significance of religion for the civil rights movement? How did the civil rights movement demonstrate the public power of religion in America?

#### LEARN MORE

The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II by Robert Wuthnow

Religion in America Since 1945: A History by Patrick Allitt

Spiritual Politics: Religion and America Since World War II by Mark Silk

A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story by William Martin

The Preacher and the Presidents: Billy Graham in the White House by Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy

Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in an Age of Anxiety by Andrew Finstuen

A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. edited by James M. Washington

Parting the Waters, Pillar of Fire, and At Canaan's Edge by Taylor Branch

The Preacher King by Richard Lischer

Let the Trumpet Sound: A Life of Martin Luther King Jr. by Stephen B. Oates

Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement by John Lewis

A Way Out of No Way: The Spiritual Memoirs of Andrew Young by Andrew Young

God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights by Charles Marsh

Blessed are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr, Eight White Religious Leaders, and the Letter From Birmingham Jail by S. Jonathan Bass

Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement edited by Davis Houck and David Dixon King's Dream by Eric Sundquist

The Word of the Lord Is Upon Me by Jonathan Rieder

The Making of a Catholic President: Kennedy vs. Nixon 1960 by Shaun Casey

God in the White House by Randall Balmer

Protestantism in America by Randall Balmer and Lauren F. Winner

Religion in American Politics: A Short History by Frank Lambert

The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind by Mark Noll

The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America by Sarah Barringer Gordon

Separation of Church and State by Philip Hamburger

The Battle Over School Prayer: How Engel V. Vitale Changed America by Bruce J. Dierenfield

The First Amendment in Schools by Charles Haynes et al.

One Woman's Fight by Vashti Cromwell McCollum

PBS: Crusade: The Life of Billy Graham

DVD of a public television production by historian Randall Balmer.

Stanford University: The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute

Stanford is the home of the King Papers Project, an effort to publish a definitive 14-volume edition of King's most significant correspondence, sermons, speeches, writings and unpublished manuscripts.

Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change

Based in Atlanta, the center is dedicated to research, education and training in the principles, philosophy and methods of nonviolence.

PBS: AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: Eyes on the Prize

Major documentary series covering events of the civil rights movement from 1954-1985

First Amendment Center A nonpartisan forum that provides education and information to the public and groups including scholars and legal experts, educators, government policy makers, and students.

Wheaton College: Billy Graham Center Archives

Online exhibits, photographs, oral history collections and a searchable database.

Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

## Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum

The Lord Is Not on Trial Here Today by Jay Rosenstein

Documentary film on the story of Vashti McCollum and her landmark First Amendment case before the U.S. Supreme Court on the relationship between religion and public schools in America.