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The Decline of American Civil Religion: Liturgy in Thanksgiving Proclamations

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Abstract

Scholars can gain valuable insight into presidential leadership and the relationship between church and state by examining the role of presidents in American civil religion. This paper aims to understand how presidents use their liturgical role to advance their agenda. To examine the liturgical role of the president, I examined the gradual decline of the presence of Biblical themes and various prayers present throughout presidential thanksgiving proclamations. This paper argues that the decline of the liturgical role of the president is prevalent in the thanksgiving proclamations.

0. Introduction

Different presidents throughout American history have made religious references in their addresses and proclamations. In his inaugural address, President Biden mentioned how “we come together as one nation, under God.”¹ President Trump also describes how America “will be protected by God” at his inauguration.² These presidents’ references to God might seem commonplace to the average American citizen who is used to hearing “God bless America,” even in a secularized world. However, it seems less obvious when one considers how the religious undertones of the presidency is able to coexist with the formal separation between church and state in America.

This was guaranteed by the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights, which states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”³ In different cases, this has been interpreted to mean that the state cannot impose itself upon a specific religion or church in a way that would be harmful to the good of the public. For example, the state cannot lawfully prevent Jews from studying the Torah. It has also

¹ House, The White. 2021. “Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.” *The White House*.

² Staff, Politico. 2017. “Full Text: 2017 Donald Trump Inauguration Speech Transcript.” *POLITICO*.

³ “The Bill of Rights: A Transcription.” 2015. *National Archives*.

been interpreted to mean that different religions and churches should not impose themselves on the state. One example of this would be that a Lutheran president would not be able to lawfully declare Lutheranism as the official religion and impose Lutheran beliefs on the American public.

Throughout speeches and proclamations, the president tends to reference God and quote the Bible, which references the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, these religious references are not meant to impose a specific set of Jewish or Protestant beliefs in the American public, but rather, they are used as a means to unify the American people. The religious undertones of the American presidency do not indicate a unity between any particular church and state. Instead, they indicate the presence of a civil religion. A civil religion, according to Robert Bellah, is “a belief system that draws upon the religious ideologies and common historical experiences of the American people, unifying diverse peoples into one people and interpreting and giving meaning to their shared experience by putting their existence into a common frame of reference.”⁴

Bellah’s articulation of civil religion in America indicates that America has a religious dimension that is different from the various churches and religions present throughout America. The religious undertones of the presidency also indicate that it is the president who plays a “liturgical role” by uniting the American people through their religious references in speeches, addresses and proclamations.

In this thesis, I will argue that the American civil religion has declined over time by examining how the liturgical role of the president has devolved. I will first describe the American civil religion in more detail and examine its role in American history. I will also analyze how the civil religion is a unifying force for the American people. Furthermore, I will define the liturgical role of the president and demonstrate how it has been used to promote the president’s agenda in Thanksgiving proclamations.

⁴ Bellah, Robert N. 1967. “Civil Religion in America.” *Daedalus* 96(1): 1–21.

I. Civil Religion

I. *The Definition of Civil Religion*

Although there are several interpretations of civil religion, I will be using Bellah's definition for the sake of my argument. His definition of civil religion is one that reconciles the religiosity prevalent in American institutions with a country that values the separation of church and state. Bellah's definition of civil religion also demonstrates why religion is essential for unifying a pluralistic American society.

The first part of Bellah's definition describes how civil religion is a "belief system that draws upon the religious ideologies and common historical experiences of the American people."⁵ Civil religion is not simply a loose set of beliefs espoused by figures throughout American history, but rather, it is a form of crafting the identity of the American people. One example of this is when Abraham Lincoln established the American Revolution as a unifying event for the American people in his Lyceum Address.⁶ Throughout the Lyceum Address, Lincoln calls for the American people to remain loyal to the fathers of the American revolution and to the law. Lincoln also calls for this adherence and reverence for the law by using civil religion when he quotes Jesus when he says the "gates of hell shall not prevail" at the end of the Lyceum Address.⁷ However, this does not mean that the American civil religion is the same as calling for a strict adherence to the Constitution, as other religions might call for an adherence to the Bible or the Torah. Instead, presidents use American civil religion to encourage constitutional patriotism, which is a type of "a consciousness of belonging to the state."⁸ This compels American citizens to adhere to the Constitution and the president's own agenda. The

⁵ Bellah, Robert N. 1967. "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus* 96(1): 1–21.

⁶ "Abraham Lincoln's Lyceum Address."

⁷ "Abraham Lincoln's Lyceum Address."

⁸ Müller, Jan-Werner. 2009. *Constitutional Patriotism*.

reinforcement of constitutional patriotism is significant because presidents can use religious elements to further their agenda and encourage loyalty even in a pluralistic society.

The second part of Bellah's definition describes the unifying aspect of civil religion. One reason for why several religions can coexist with civil religion, without considering civil religion a threat, is because civil religion is not about a specific church and it is not exclusionary. Rather, it is the religious dimension of the political realm within the United States.⁹ Moreover, the civil religion provides a narrative for the American people that shapes their identity in a way that does not exclude any specific group of people. For example, the claim that all Americans, no matter what actual origin, are the heirs of the American revolution does not exclude any specific group of people. However, one might argue that since civil religion in America is clearly dependent upon Judeo-Christian tradition it does, in effect, exclude non-believers. As America has become more pluralistic over the years, it is possible that this pluralism has led to the erosion of civil religion. I will discuss this further when I describe the decline of the liturgical role of the president.

In addition, civil religion guides the way citizens interact with the state. The civil religion provides American citizens with means of interpreting their experiences and encourages constitutional patriotism among American citizens. In his book, *Choosing Presidents: Symbols of Political Leadership*, Michael Novak describes how civil religion is also a "dimension of citizenship that encourages a more than pragmatic relation to the state, a relation that the ancient Romans called *pietas*."¹⁰ That is to say that civil religion not only creates a narrative of American history, but it also drives them to be constitutional patriots. Moreover, it is a way for American citizens to demonstrate their reverence "in return for all they gain from civil society."¹¹ However,

⁹ Bellah, Robert N. 1967. "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus* 96(1): 1–21.

¹⁰ Novak, Michael. 1992. *Choosing Presidents: Symbols of Political Leadership*. Pg. xxii.

¹¹ Novak, Michael. 1992. *Choosing Presidents: Symbols of Political Leadership*. Pg. xxii.

as I will argue later, this reverence on the part of both the president and the citizens has eroded over time, perhaps because they feel they are not gaining from civil society. Therefore, the new form of *pietas* in America is now fading.

II. The History of Civil Religion in America

There are different events throughout American history that mark turning points in American civil religion. Furthermore, these events in American history are interpreted through the civil religion and craft the image of the American people. The specific events that mark turning points in the civil religion include the American Revolution, the Civil War, the civil rights movement and the 9/11 attack. These turning points mark the events that have served to reinterpret the American experience and present presidents an opportunity to craft the narrative surrounding them. The history of civil religion in America will also influence how presidents approach their liturgical role.

a. Pilgrims and the American Revolution

The birth of a new nation marked the start of American civil religion. This birth is characterized by two events: the pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock and the American Revolution. Throughout the Thanksgiving proclamations, inaugural addresses and other speeches made by presidents, Plymouth Rock marks the beginning of the nation. Furthermore, presidents often compare the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock to Moses and the Hebrews escaping Egypt and searching for the promised land.¹² This comparison created a narrative that casts America as the “promised land” and the Americans as its “chosen people”. The narrative was also popular among Puritan settlers, such as John Winthrop, who promoted the idea that Massachusetts would “differ from the rest of the world” and be a “city upon a hill.”¹³

¹² Washington, George, John Adams, and James Madison. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

¹³ “John Winthrop Dreams of a City on a Hill, 1630 | The American Yawp Reader.”

b. *The Civil War*

With the Civil War, civil religion occupied a larger place in presidential speeches and addresses. Throughout the Civil War, there was a “crisis of faith” in American civil religion. This was a crisis over what characterized loyalty to the American Constitution. Throughout the Civil War, Lincoln would often define the new *pietas* and made use of Biblical allusions in defense of the emancipation of the slaves.

c. *The 60s: the Civil Rights Movement and the JFK Assassination*

Throughout the 60s, there were several events in which presidents exercised their liturgical role to encourage the American people to become constitutional patriots. For example, just as Lincoln crafted the narrative surrounding the Civil War and slavery, Kennedy crafted the narrative surrounding the civil rights movement. For example, Kennedy drew similarities between the American civil war and the strife surrounding the civil rights movement in one of his thanksgiving proclamations.¹⁴ The division over segregation presented Kennedy and leaders in the civil rights movement, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., with an opportunity to use “American church religion” to supply “a strong moral consensus” regarding segregation.¹⁵

d. *9/11*

9/11 is also an event that marked a shift in American civil religion. Although most American citizens had become more jaded and less influenced by the liturgical role of the president, 9/11 was a moment in which the president’s exercise of the liturgical role influenced the American people. George W. Bush was able to condemn the acts of 9/11 and mobilize the American people by evoking the narrative of America as a “city upon a hill.” For example, in his

¹⁴ Eisenhower, Dwight D, John F Kennedy, Lyndon B Johnson, and Richard Nixon. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

¹⁵ Bellah, Robert N. 1967. “Civil Religion in America.” *Daedalus* 96(1): 1–21.

thanksgiving proclamation, Bush described America as a “free, faithful, and fair-minded land.”¹⁶ This uses the “city upon a hill” narrative to frame America as being superior to other nations, such as the nations from which the terrorists came.

e. Present Events

Although within the past few years, there has not been a specific reference in presidential speeches to contemporary events in American history, there have been significant events which have altered American civil religion. Trump’s presidency indicated the ineffectiveness of the president’s liturgical role. His presidency performed a similar function to the Watergate Scandal and other presidential scandals in recent years: it led to an overall disbelief in the reverence for the presidency and the grandeur of the office of the presidency. Another event that had made the liturgical role ineffective was the 2020 election, in which Trump had claimed the elections were rigged and Biden had been elected illegitimately. This also eroded the effectiveness of the liturgical role, which guides the American people in revering the state and unifies them in their understanding of who they are. These different events are significant because they influence the effectiveness of the president’s liturgical role and shape how the liturgical role manifests itself in the thanksgiving proclamations.

2. The Liturgical Role of the President

I. Defining the Liturgical Role

Within the civil religion, the president acts as a *pontifex maximus* and exercises a liturgical role. By “liturgical,” I mean the role relating to the set of words, music and actions used in ceremonies of some religions, such as Christianity. The president’s liturgical role is exercised in his actions throughout different ceremonies, such as the Inauguration. This liturgical role is exercised when the president uses different words, music and actions that evoke the

¹⁶ Clinton, William J, and George W Bush. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

Judeo-Christian tradition to promote his agenda. He leads the American people in their *pietas* by framing history and events through the lens of civil religion. This is significant because he can guide the people and provide them with an example of how to revere the nation and the nation's ideals. For example, by proclaiming a day of thanksgiving and prayer, he encourages the American people to express gratitude for their history and current events. Because this is a liturgical action, the president's example sets a precedent for future ceremonies and indicates how the American people should approach future events.

In addition, the liturgical role is a unifying one in which the president guides the behavior of the American people under God. Although presidents often attempt to link the American people with their past, this is not an exercise of the liturgical role without a link to God and allusions to the Judeo-Christian tradition. This role often manifests itself when the president guides the American people in prayer, specifically in thanksgiving proclamations.

II. Why is the liturgical role a part of the presidency?

The liturgical role is an essential part of the presidency because it is a way for presidents to support their political agendas. In addition, it is a way for presidents to emphasize the subordination of both themselves and the American people to God. The liturgical role also legitimizes different American values and guides the behavior of the American people.

3. The Decline of the Liturgical Role

I. Thanksgiving Day Proclamations

A. What are they?

Thanksgiving Day proclamations are speeches made by the president to encourage the nation to pray and give thanks. Thanksgiving proclamations were not originally speeches to commemorate the pilgrims' arrival at Plymouth Rock, even though this is their current function.

Instead, Thanksgiving proclamations functioned as a list of what the nation had received from God in a given period of time. These proclamations were originally reserved for special occasions, such as wars or the death of a former president, in which the president felt compelled to encourage the nation to pray. However, Thanksgiving Day was established under Lincoln's presidency to make this practice of giving thanks a regular occurrence. and it "serves to integrate the family into the civil religion."¹⁷ Later, Kennedy officially made Thanksgiving Day a holiday to commemorate the example of the pilgrims giving thanks and praying at their harvest festival.¹⁸

B. Beginning with George Washington

George Washington's proclamations reflect how presidents exercised their liturgical role selectively prior to the proclamations of the presidents after Lincoln. In his presidency, Washington made two proclamations. In these proclamations, he focused on giving thanks to God.¹⁹ Washington did not specifically mention the pilgrims or the landing at Plymouth Rock. Instead, both his first and second thanksgiving proclamation centered around the role of God in guiding the nation. These, however, do not provide a narrative for a specific event or attempt to frame the event as a civil religious event. In fact, they demonstrate Washington leading the country in prayer and offering the American people an example of the new form of *pietas*.

C. From John Adams to Lincoln

Unlike George Washington, the next president, John Adams, did not make any thanksgiving proclamations. In their place, Adams had two proclamations that declared a "Day of Fasting and Humiliation (Not Thanksgiving)".²⁰ Although these are not thanksgiving proclamations, they performed a similar function to Washington's proclamations: they led the

¹⁷ Bellah, Robert N. 1967. "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus* 96(1): 1–21.

¹⁸ Bradford, Robert. "Thanksgiving Proclamation."

¹⁹ Washington, George, John Adams, and James Madison. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

²⁰ Washington, George, John Adams, and James Madison. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

country in prayer. In this first day of fasting and humiliation, Adams describes how “the safety and prosperity of nations...depend on the protection and blessing of Almighty God” thereby emphasizing the dependence of America upon God.²¹ In addition, he stressed the need for the American people to fast and pray so that the “country may be protected from all dangers which threaten it” and “that our civil and religious privileges may be preserved inviolate and perpetuated to the latest generations.”²² This emphasis on prayer for the defense of the country is significant because it demonstrates how Adams exercises the liturgical role in order to exercise his role as commander-in-chief. The second proclamation of a day of fasting and humiliation is also characterized by Adams’ call for prayer in defense of the country against “the hostile designs and insidious acts of a foreign nation.”²³ Therefore, both proclamations calling for prayer and fasting allow Adams to unite the country during a time of military crisis. Moreover, the liturgical role of the president during Adams’ presidency was characterized by a defensive role, thus demonstrating how the liturgical role supported the president’s other roles. While Washington’s Thanksgiving proclamations were simply thanking God for the gifts to the nation, Adams’ calls to prayer differ in that they make a national security issue the subject of prayer.

Although both of his predecessors issued special proclamations, Thomas Jefferson did not issue any Thanksgiving proclamations or even days of fasting and humiliation. The lack of a Thanksgiving proclamation could also be interpreted as a rejection of the liturgical role. In his inaugural address, Jefferson also does not exercise the liturgical role and makes no mention of God or the sacred. Jefferson was also known for having written his own version of the Bible, entitled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, in which the miracles and the Resurrection are

²¹ Washington, George, John Adams, and James Madison. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

²² Washington, George, John Adams, and James Madison. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

²³ Washington, George, John Adams, and James Madison. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

absent.²⁴ His version of the Bible could be considered a rejection of the divinity of Christ and the authority of God over the state. Later on, in his Address to Danbury Baptists, he stated that he “refrained from prescribing even those occasional performances of devotion...because they were religious exercises.”²⁵ This is significant because it demonstrates that Jefferson believed in the firm separation of, not just the Church, but also religion itself from the role of the president. He also “asserted that the proclamations of thanksgivings and fasts were ‘practiced indeed by the Executive of another nation as the legal head of its church,’ i.e., by George III, King of England.”²⁶ It is reasonable to suppose that Jefferson’s emphasis on a firm separation between religion and the state was not a personal rejection of God, but rather, a rejection of monarchy and the alliance between altar and crown. Furthermore, Jefferson’s lack of proclamations indicates a firm rejection of the liturgical role, because it seemed to hark back to the British monarchy.

In contrast to Jefferson, Madison continued the act of issuing special proclamations for days of Thanksgiving. However, Madison’s Thanksgiving proclamations are significantly shorter than both Washington and Adams’ proclamations. Although Adams’ proclamations may have been characterized by a time of prayer for a foreign crisis, Madison’s proclamations are characterized by the end of a crisis. The first Thanksgiving proclamation was written during the war of independence, but Madison used this proclamation to declare a day of fasting and humiliation, but also declare the same day a day of Thanksgiving.²⁷ This choice to declare the day of fasting and humiliation as a day of Thanksgiving contrasts with Adams’ declaration of days of fasting and humiliation. One reason for this decision could be due to Madison’s approach to the liturgical role. Rather than emphasizing the tragedy and the gravity of a foreign crisis, like

²⁴ “Why Thomas Jefferson Created His Own Bible | At the Smithsonian| Smithsonian Magazine.”

²⁵ “‘A Wall of Separation’ (June 1998) - Library of Congress Information Bulletin.”

²⁶ “‘A Wall of Separation’ (June 1998) - Library of Congress Information Bulletin.”

²⁷ Washington, George, John Adams, and James Madison. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

Adams did in his proclamations, Madison invites the American people to remember the “distinguished favors” and “abundant fruits of the season.”²⁸ Therefore, Madison is not supplementing his commander-in-chief role with the liturgical role, but rather, he is providing the American people with hope. Furthermore, Madison is separating the American people from the conflict. Madison’s second Thanksgiving proclamation was written after the war and further emphasizes peace and thanksgiving. In this proclamation, Madison asks the American people to observe a day of thanksgiving for God “restoring to them the blessing of peace.”²⁹ One significant difference between Adams and Madison’s proclamations is that Madison emphasizes the peace and bounty given to the American people, rather than the conflict. This could be a way to give the American people hope and shield them from the realities of the conflict. In addition, it could be a way of using the liturgical role to protect the American people from conflict, rather than mobilizing them to act.

D. Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln

Although there were eleven presidents between Madison and Lincoln, none of them issued special proclamations for days of thanksgiving or fasting and prayer. In fact, Lincoln’s second thanksgiving proclamation in 1863 is actually the first in “an unbroken string of annual presidential Thanksgiving proclamations” and is “regarded as the true beginning of the national Thanksgiving holiday.”³⁰ The thanksgiving proclamations and days of prayer in this period during the Civil War were also interestingly issued by Jefferson Davis. This is significant because Jefferson Davis attempted to exercise a liturgical role, unique to the presidency, as the leader of the Confederacy. Days of prayer and thanksgiving proclamations were meant to craft

²⁸ Washington, George, John Adams, and James Madison. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

²⁹ Washington, George, John Adams, and James Madison. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

³⁰ “Pilgrim Hall Museum - Thanksgiving Proclamations.”

the image of the Confederacy under God's protection. In contrast, Lincoln's exercise of the liturgical role during his presidency was meant to preserve the Union and institutionalize the civil religion.

In his first proclamation, Davis declared a day of fasting and humiliation as the president of the Confederate States.³¹ In this he led the people in the Confederate States in prayer to ask for victory in the Civil War. By asking the Confederacy to pray to God for victory in war, Davis tried to exercise the liturgical role and guide the American people in how they should approach their relationship to the Confederacy. Davis's first proclamation exercised the liturgical role in a way that divides the American people and distinguishes between the Confederates and the northerners. In the second proclamation, Davis made a thanksgiving proclamation in gratitude for the Confederate victory at the Battle of Manassas.³² By claiming that God is the one responsible for the victory of the Confederacy, this created a crisis of legitimacy when it came to American civil religion. Davis's presentation of the Confederacy as supported by God poses a direct challenge to the idea that the Union, that America, ought to be revered by the general American public. Therefore, Davis's attempt to exercise the liturgical role of the president demonstrates how American civil religion could influence the American people's perceptions of the civil war.

While Davis made thanksgiving proclamations and days of prayer and fasting, Lincoln made his own. Two of these were for victories in battle. In his first proclamation, Lincoln led the American people in thanking God for the "victory in battle," "suppressing an internal rebellion" and averting from the country the "dangers of foreign intervention and invasion" in 1862.³³

Lincoln's claims in the thanksgiving proclamation are significant because they oppose Davis's

³¹ Lincoln, Abraham, and Jefferson Davis. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

³² Lincoln, Abraham, and Jefferson Davis. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

³³ Lincoln, Abraham, and Jefferson Davis. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

attempt to frame the Confederacy as a separate nation. Instead, Lincoln, as he does in his speeches throughout the Civil War, frames the Confederates as rebels. Moreover, Lincoln also presents the Confederates as threats to the nation, equal to that of foreign intervention. By placing both the “internal rebellion” and the “foreign intervention and invasion” in the same sentence, Lincoln frames both as threats averted by God.

Lincoln’s second proclamation is also a thanksgiving for a victory in battle, in which he continues to encourage the American people to look upon the Confederacy as a rebellion. Moreover, Lincoln also asks God to lead “the whole nation through the paths of repentance and submission to the divine will back to the perfect enjoyment of union and fraternal peace.”³⁴ This request emphasizes God’s role in unifying the nation, and by requesting that the nation be led down the paths of “submission to the divine will,” it emphasizes how the Confederacy and the civil war were opposed to the divine will, in doing so it discredits Davis’s claim that the Confederacy was guided by God.

Lincoln’s next proclamation is the most important because it was the “first in an unbroken series of autumn proclamations,” in which he instituted the annual day of Thanksgiving.³⁵ The subject of the address, however, is not the contemporary narrative of the pilgrims and native Americans sharing a meal with one another. Instead, it focused on the gifts given to the American people, in spite of the civil war. The proclamation did not create a new event to be solidified in the “transcendent framework” of American civil religion.³⁶ Instead, Lincoln simply created a general framework for future presidents to give thanks to God for the

³⁴ Lincoln, Abraham, and Jefferson Davis. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

³⁵ Lincoln, Abraham, and Jefferson Davis. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

³⁶ Weiss, Jana. 2018. “The National Day of Mourning: Thanksgiving, Civil Religion, and American Indians.” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 63(3): 367–88.

general positive events in their presidential agenda. It also provided the president with an opportunity to exercise his liturgical role, not just during major battles, but every year.

The fourth proclamation of Lincoln's presidency continued to highlight the blessings given by God to the American people in that year, specifically keeping the soldiers safe, but also describing the positive effects of emancipation on American industry. It is significant because Lincoln here reframed the idea of emancipation as being a blessing from God. While some in the Confederacy might have claimed that emancipation was contrary to God's will for America, Lincoln exercised the liturgical role when he singled out emancipation as one of God's blessings on American industry.

E. From Andrew Johnson to Eisenhower

After Lincoln instituted a day of thanksgiving, every president made a thanksgiving proclamation every year. In this period from Andrew Johnson to Eisenhower, the thanksgiving proclamation was transformed from being a special proclamation issued by the president in times of crises and other significant events in American history to a formulaic, routine proclamation. This shift in meaning is significant because it indicates less intention in the exercise of the liturgical role. Furthermore, presidents began to use the thanksgiving proclamation, not to emphasize the role of God in contemporary events. This altered the way that presidents promoted their agendas and reverence for the American ideals.

Andrew Johnson continued to exercise the liturgical role in his thanksgiving proclamations. In his first thanksgiving proclamation, he led the nation in giving thanks to God for relieving them of the civil war. Johnson exercised the liturgical role by emphasizing how God blesses the people. By emphasizing the end of the civil war as a blessing, Johnson transformed the end of the civil war from a political good into a spiritual good. Johnson also described how

God blessed the nation by averting the nation from “foreign war, pestilence and famine” and described the “fruits of an abundant season.”³⁷ His exercise of the liturgical role focused more on guiding the nation towards being grateful for God’s blessings to the nation in agriculture. By emphasizing agricultural abundance as another blessing, he also transformed agriculture into another sphere in which God takes an active role.

He also further defined the concept of a national blessing. Throughout his proclamations, Johnson mentioned how the granaries, fields and industry are flourishing.³⁸ This is significant because Johnson provided the American people with a look towards the future, rather than dwelling on the civil war that had pervaded the country. It shifted the focus of the prayers away from war to agriculture and industry. His exercise of the liturgical role was unifying because it emphasized the recovery and the future steps of America, rather than the deep divisions of the Civil War. Johnson’s emphasis on agriculture also set the precedent for future thanksgiving proclamations. Bounty in agriculture thus became the primary subject in thanksgiving proclamations and the blessing from God each year. In his fourth proclamation, Johnson did not mention God’s role in industry and agriculture until the end. Instead, he emphasized the role of the American people in industry and agriculture. This transformed his thanksgiving proclamation from a call to pray to God to a praise of the American people. The thanksgiving proclamation was no longer about the blessings of God bestowed upon the American people, but rather, the good that the American people had themselves achieved.

Ulysses Grant’s thanksgiving proclamations also demonstrated a dramatic shift in the nature of Thanksgiving proclamations. While Lincoln’s proclamations were about the civil war, Grant followed the example of Johnson and discussed agriculture and industry as the blessings

³⁷ Lincoln, Abraham, and Jefferson Davis. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

³⁸ Lincoln, Abraham, and Jefferson Davis. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

from God. Grant's first thanksgiving proclamation resembles Johnson's last thanksgiving proclamation, in that it places more of an emphasis on the role of the American people in industry and agriculture. Because he did not claim that it was God who bestowed these things on the American people, his description of the blessings on America appears as a "system check" rather than leadership in prayer. For example, Grant listed off the "good things" that occurred that year when he mentions "abundant crops reward the labors of the husbandmen" and "commerce and manufactures have successfully prosecuted their peaceful paths."³⁹ This list is significant because it indicates that each area and industry is running smoothly on its own. There is also little to no indication that God has played a role in these areas. In addition, in this proclamation, Grant only mentions God as the "Supreme Author" prior to his signature and official declaration of the day of thanksgiving.⁴⁰ The placement of Grant's mention of God in his first proclamation is interesting because it separates America's blessings from God.

However, the rest of Grant's thanksgiving proclamations provide more of an emphasis on God's role. In his second thanksgiving proclamation, Grant distinguishes the American people from others in the world in their gratitude towards God. Specifically, Grant states that it "behooves" others "to acknowledge their gratitude for" God's "favors and mercies," the American people "have special cause to be thankful."⁴¹ Therefore, Grant exercised the liturgical role in his crafting the image of the American people. Because the American people express their thanks to God, this distinguishes them from the rest of the world and sets the American people up as an example for the rest of the world in their civil religion. The rest of Grant's

³⁹ Lincoln, Abraham, and Jefferson Davis. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁴⁰ Lincoln, Abraham, and Jefferson Davis. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁴¹ Grant, Ulysses S, and Rutherford B Hayes. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

proclamations continued the pattern of recalling the fruits of industry and agriculture and prayers for those who had suffered during the year.⁴²

In contrast, Rutherford B. Hayes' thanksgiving proclamations demonstrated more of an exercise of the liturgical role. While Grant's thanksgiving proclamations were shorter and more focused on industry and agriculture flourishing on their own, Hayes' proclamations seem to give God more credit for growth in these areas. For example, throughout his proclamations, Hayes described the American people's "dependence upon the divine favor for all the good gifts of life."⁴³ This indicates that the American people are not completely independent and that industry and agriculture do not flourish on their own. Hayes also gave more meaning to the act of thanksgiving in his proclamations. In his first thanksgiving proclamation, he described the time of thanksgiving as a "season at which a religious people celebrates with praise and thanksgiving the enduring mercy of the Almighty God."⁴⁴ Hayes' description of the American people as being "religious" is significant because it contrasts with later thanksgiving proclamations' descriptions of the American people. This is similar to how Grant distinguished the American people from the rest of the world in his thanksgiving address. Both Grant and Hayes exercise the liturgical role in setting the American people apart for their civil religion and *pietas*. Moreover, this emphasizes how thanksgiving is an act unique to American civil religion. In his other thanksgiving proclamations, Hayes continually characterized the American people as being a "religious people," but he also demonstrated how this act of thanksgiving is the focus of the thanksgiving proclamation. Rather than recalling the significant events of the year like Lincoln and Johnson, Hayes focused on the identity of the American people as a people that prays. Because Hayes does not mention specific events or milestones for the American people, his proclamations are

⁴² Grant, Ulysses S, and Rutherford B Hayes. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁴³ Grant, Ulysses S, and Rutherford B Hayes. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁴⁴ Grant, Ulysses S, and Rutherford B Hayes. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

not limited in time and seem to be more in tune with the transcendent framework of American civil religion.

Chester Arthur's thanksgiving proclamations also demonstrate his exercise of the liturgical role to promote peace. In his first thanksgiving proclamation, Arthur describes how thanksgiving has "long been a pious custom" in which the American people look back on all their blessings.⁴⁵ Therefore, Arthur demonstrates that thanksgiving is an act of piety and by making a thanksgiving proclamation, he exercises his liturgical role by leading this act of piety. Furthermore, Arthur's reference to thanksgiving as "pious custom" indicates his continuation of Hayes' emphasis on distinguishing the American people from the rest of the world. However, Arthur's proclamations contrast with the other presidents after the civil war in that he does not emphasize the blessings in agriculture and industry as much. Instead, Arthur primarily emphasized peace with other nations as a blessing from God, especially in his second thanksgiving proclamation. Arthur's third and fourth thanksgiving proclamations are far shorter than the first two.

In his first presidential term, Grover Cleveland's thanksgiving proclamations are similar to Arthur's proclamations, but they emphasize the role of God more often. Cleveland's first thanksgiving proclamation describes God's active role in the history of America. For example, Cleveland describes God's "watchful care and guiding hand...in every stage of [the American people's] national life."⁴⁶ Cleveland also moves the thanksgiving proclamations away from the subject of agriculture and industry. While the last few presidents had discussed the bounty of the earth and the flourishing of American industry in more detail in their proclamations, Cleveland

⁴⁵ Hayes, Rutherford B, Chester A Arthur, Grover Cleveland, and Benjamin Harrison. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁴⁶ Hayes, Rutherford B, Chester A Arthur, Grover Cleveland, and Benjamin Harrison. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

did not make them the centerpiece of his proclamations. Instead, Cleveland goes into more detail about how the American people should observe the day of thanksgiving. Cleveland's recommendations for the observation of thanksgiving are clearer at the end of each of his proclamations. Most presidents would simply have a sentence describing how the American people should cease "from their secular labors" and meet "in their several places of worship."⁴⁷ However, Cleveland made this section of the thanksgiving proclamation occupy more than half of the proclamation. In the first proclamation, Cleveland emphasized that the American people "let all secular business be suspended" and "assemble in their usual places of worship and with prayer and songs of praise devoutly testify their gratitude" to God.⁴⁸ Although this was not a shift in the message of the thanksgiving proclamation, Cleveland's detail in describing how the American people should behave in their respective places of worship demonstrated his strong exercise of the liturgical role. Therefore, Cleveland articulated and reshaped the liturgy of thanksgiving in American civil religion.

Cleveland also changed the structure of the thanksgiving proclamation to encourage the American people to be more charitable. After this emphasis on suspending secular business, he described God's blessings on the American people in more detail. For example, he listed the intentions for thanksgiving when he mentions the "security against the scourge of pestilence" and "deliverance from the shock and danger of political convulsion."⁴⁹ Rather than describing the blessings and giving a routine declaration of thanksgiving, Cleveland first described what the American people should do, then went into the reasons behind Thanksgiving itself. Cleveland's restructuring of his thanksgiving proclamations is significant because he described the action of

⁴⁷ Hayes, Rutherford B, Chester A Arthur, Grover Cleveland, and Benjamin Harrison. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁴⁸ Hayes, Rutherford B, Chester A Arthur, Grover Cleveland, and Benjamin Harrison. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁴⁹ Hayes, Rutherford B, Chester A Arthur, Grover Cleveland, and Benjamin Harrison. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

thanksgiving and then the intentions. Cleveland's exercise of the liturgical role as president was strong because he explicitly guided the American people in how to give thanks and observe this day in American civil religion. He also prescribed charity as a form of prayer and observance on the day of thanksgiving. In every thanksgiving proclamation, after listing the blessings, Cleveland closed the proclamation by asking the American people to keep the poor in their thoughts and prayers.⁵⁰ This call for charity is significant because it is a request for the American people to follow the example of God in bestowing blessings upon others. In addition, the call for charity is also a more specific request for action on a day of thanksgiving, rather than simply asking the Americans to pray. Therefore, Cleveland's exercise of the liturgical role in these thanksgiving proclamations is significant because he calls Americans to action, rather than just vocal prayer. Cleveland also adds charity as another liturgical action in American civil religion.

Benjamin Harrison's thanksgiving proclamations demonstrated a gradual increase in his exercise of the liturgical role. The first two appeared to be more routine and were shorter than Cleveland's proclamations. Each followed a similar formula of mentioning the American people's dependence on God, blessings and a general observance of thanksgiving day. In addition, Harrison's thanksgiving proclamations seem to be a shorter, simplified version of Cleveland's proclamations, but Harrison's proclamations do not follow the same structure as Cleveland's proclamations. While Cleveland placed the blessings after declaring a day of thanksgiving, Harrison did not follow this structure. Instead, the structure of Harrison's proclamations is more similar to the presidents prior to Cleveland, in the short listing of the blessings prior to the official declaration of a thanksgiving day.

⁵⁰ Hayes, Rutherford B, Chester A Arthur, Grover Cleveland, and Benjamin Harrison. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

Grover Cleveland's thanksgiving proclamations during his second term follow a similar pattern to the thanksgiving addresses in his first term. This is interesting because one might expect the nature of the thanksgiving addresses to change, especially because he is returning to the presidential office, rather than continuing after his first term. However, in these thanksgiving proclamations, Cleveland was more explicit in his recommendations for how to observe the day of thanksgiving. For example, throughout the thanksgiving proclamations of his second term, Cleveland placed even more emphasis on how the American people ought to "remember the poor and needy."⁵¹ Although this was common in his other thanksgiving proclamations, Cleveland's placement and stronger emphasis on the poor and needy makes the act appear more necessary for the day of thanksgiving. While he mentioned charity in the last two thanksgiving proclamations in his first presidential term, charity occupied a larger place in the thanksgiving proclamations of his second presidential term. This is significant because Cleveland used his liturgical role to reinforce charity as a liturgical act in American civil religion in his second term.

William McKinley's thanksgiving proclamations demonstrate how he exercised the liturgical role to craft a narrative from victories in battle and contemporary political events. While most of the presidents after the Civil War did not describe specific contemporary political events in detail, McKinley described the Philippine-American War, and the placement of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam and Cuba under American control. One example of this was in a thanksgiving address, not a proclamation. During the Philippine-American War, McKinley made an "address to the people for thanksgiving and prayer."⁵² This was significant because McKinley made a thanksgiving address for a day that was not on the usual November Thanksgiving day.

⁵¹ Hayes, Rutherford B, Chester A Arthur, Grover Cleveland, and Benjamin Harrison. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁵² Hayes, Rutherford B, Chester A Arthur, Grover Cleveland, and Benjamin Harrison. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

Therefore, he deviated from the presidents after Lincoln in his exercise of the liturgical role by thanking God for a significant event, rather than on an assigned day. McKinley's demonstration of this harkens back to the intended purpose of the thanksgiving proclamations prior to Johnson, which was to lead the American people in prayer in gratitude for a significant event. By describing the Philippine-American War as an "insurrection", McKinley approached the liturgical role in a way similar to presidents prior to Lincoln.⁵³ Presidents, like Washington and Adams, combined the liturgical role with their role as commander-in-chief. Therefore, McKinley's exercise of the liturgical role was similar to that of Davis and Lincoln, in his use of the liturgical role to assist him as commander-in-chief.

McKinley also deviated from presidents after Lincoln in his description of America's new control of Spain's former territories under the Treaty of Paris in 1898. With the ratification of the Treaty of Paris, the U.S. gained control of Cuba, Guam, Puerto Rico and the Philippines.⁵⁴ This was significant because it marked the beginning of the U.S.'s emergence as "an imperial power."⁵⁵ By mentioning this event in his third thanksgiving proclamation, McKinley expands the liturgical role into the new American territories. It extends American civil religion into the territories outside the U.S. and makes them "missionary" territories. By mentioning the new territories within the U.S, McKinley extends the act of thanksgiving over to the territories. For example, in his third thanksgiving proclamation, McKinley mentioned the people of Puerto Rico, who had been struck by a hurricane, "destroying the homes and property of the inhabitants."⁵⁶ This is significant because it includes a new request for Americans to ask God. After mentioning this event, McKinley exercises the liturgical role when he describes how the hurricane in Puerto

⁵³ Hayes, Rutherford B, Chester A Arthur, Grover Cleveland, and Benjamin Harrison. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁵⁴ "Crucible of Empire - PBS Online." <https://www.pbs.org/crucible/tl18.html>.

⁵⁵ "Crucible of Empire - PBS Online." <https://www.pbs.org/crucible/tl18.html>.

⁵⁶ Hayes, Rutherford B, Chester A Arthur, Grover Cleveland, and Benjamin Harrison. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

Rico “called forth the instant sympathy” of the American people “who were swift to respond with generous aid to the sufferers.”⁵⁷ He exercises the liturgical role by reinforcing the narrative of the American people being distinguished as a “chosen people.” McKinley also exercises the liturgical role by praising the goodness of the American people. Moreover, the mention of American aid in the territories turned American aid into a liturgical practice within American civil religion.

Theodore Roosevelt’s thanksgiving proclamations are significant because they deviate significantly from McKinley’s imperial and militaristic approach to the liturgical role. Although Roosevelt had the opportunity to expand on McKinley’s missionary role, he did not mention the territories throughout his thanksgiving proclamations. In fact, Roosevelt rarely mentions specific contemporary events in his proclamations. In his first proclamation, he describes the nation’s mourning for McKinley.⁵⁸ However, this is the only specific contemporary event that he mentions. This is significant because Roosevelt is not adding any contemporary events into the transcendent framework of American civil religion. Instead, he refers to general blessings typically mentioned in thanksgiving proclamations, such as abundant harvests and “welfare unhindered by war, famine or plague.”⁵⁹ Therefore, Roosevelt follows the example of presidents like Johnson in his reference to general blessings.

Roosevelt is also similar to Johnson in his emphasis on the role and accomplishments of the American people, rather than the role of God. This does not mean that presidents like Roosevelt and Johnson rejected the liturgical role in a way that resembles Jefferson. Instead, Roosevelt’s exercise of the liturgical role was more about guiding the behavior of the American

⁵⁷ Hayes, Rutherford B, Chester A Arthur, Grover Cleveland, and Benjamin Harrison. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

⁵⁸ McKinley, William, Theodore Roosevelt, and William H Taft. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

⁵⁹ McKinley, William, Theodore Roosevelt, and William H Taft. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

people and encouraging them to make use of their material well-being. In his first term, he emphasized that “true homage...shows itself in deeds.”⁶⁰ This is significant because Roosevelt’s exercise of the liturgical role does not focus on giving thanks to God, which was the intended purpose of the thanksgiving proclamation. Instead of addressing God, Roosevelt addressed the people and encouraged them to act on God’s blessings. Therefore, Roosevelt exercised the liturgical role in guiding the American people in their actions in the secular sphere. For example, in his eighth thanksgiving proclamation, Roosevelt alluded to the Biblical parable of the ten talents to emphasize the themes of productivity and fruitfulness.⁶¹ In his second term, Roosevelt was more aggressive in his exercise of the liturgical role to promote productive material well-being. Roosevelt promoted his own presidential agenda, specifically the labor laws through his exercise of the liturgical role.⁶² Therefore, Roosevelt exercised the liturgical role in his presidency to guide the behavior and orient the American people to use their material wealth for the benefit of others.

William Taft’s thanksgiving proclamations follow a similar pattern to those of his predecessors, specifically Johnson and McKinley. Taft is similar to Johnson in his description of the abundance of the blessings of the nation. For example, in his last thanksgiving proclamation, Taft described how “productions of our labor are daily finding enlarged markets abroad.”⁶³ Although he described the present state of the economy, he did not refer to a specific event. Taft simply referred to the blessings typically mentioned in Thanksgiving proclamations. At this point in presidential thanksgiving proclamations, the description of the blessings of an abundant harvest and growth in American industry became part of the basic structure of the thanksgiving

⁶⁰ McKinley, William, Theodore Roosevelt, and William H Taft. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

⁶¹ McKinley, William, Theodore Roosevelt, and William H Taft. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

⁶² “TR Center - Labor Reform.” <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Blog/Item/Labor%20Reform>.

⁶³ Taft, William H, and Woodrow Wilson. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

proclamation. Therefore, the blessings from the fields and industry became pillars in American civil religion.

Taft was not a great “innovator” of the nature of thanksgiving proclamations. In fact, Taft seems to have approached the thanksgiving proclamations as a type of report with themes similar to his predecessors. Taft specifically seems to have expanded on McKinley’s inclusion of international relations in the thanksgiving proclamation. For example, in his second thanksgiving proclamation, Taft stated that “in all essential matters our relations with other peoples are harmonious.”⁶⁴ In his last proclamation, Taft described how “our national councils have furthered the cause of peace in other lands.”⁶⁵ He follows the example of McKinley, but he does not seem to enforce the idea of the American empire as McKinley did in his thanksgiving proclamations. It is unsurprising that Taft would resemble McKinley because McKinley assigned Taft to the Philippines as a chief civil administrator.⁶⁶ It is also unsurprising that he would not resemble McKinley in his approach to the idea of the American empire because of his sympathy towards the Filipinos during his assignment.⁶⁷ Therefore, Taft’s thanksgiving proclamations are significant because they indicate his use of his liturgical role to encourage a harmonious relationship with other countries, such as the Philippines.

Woodrow Wilson’s thanksgiving proclamations were focused on themes surrounding the Panama Canal, World War I and the United Nations. In his first thanksgiving proclamation, Wilson emphasized the “peace within our own borders,” but also the potential for thriving international relations.⁶⁸ He specifically mentions the “great work at the Isthmus of Panama

⁶⁴ Taft, William H, and Woodrow Wilson. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

⁶⁵ Taft, William H, and Woodrow Wilson. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

⁶⁶ “William Howard Taft.” *The White House*.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/william-howard-taft/>.

⁶⁷ “William Howard Taft.” *The White House*.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/william-howard-taft/>.

⁶⁸ Taft, William H, and Woodrow Wilson. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

which...promises the beginning of a new age, of new contacts, new neighborhoods, new sympathies, new bonds and new achievements of cooperation and peace.”⁶⁹ This mention of the Panama Canal contrasts with McKinley’s inclusion of the American empire in the thanksgiving proclamation. Rather than adding new territories to America and bringing them into the “prayer intentions” of the thanksgiving proclamation, Wilson described the international presence of America. Wilson transformed the nature of the thanksgiving proclamation by discussing international relations in a way that does not depict America as an empire. Instead, Wilson portrayed America as a part of an international community striving for peace. Therefore, Wilson used these proclamations to shape the role of the American people in the international community.

However, this goal for international peace would soon be disrupted, with the start of World War I in 1914. The start of World War I was significant because Wilson did not solely address the American people in his second thanksgiving proclamation. Instead, he expanded the proclamation to the broader international community. In his second thanksgiving proclamation, he mentioned the usual blessings included in the proclamation, but he also discussed how the outbreak of war has made the “nations of the world...feel the more fully and see the more clearly their mutual interdependence upon one another.”⁷⁰ While the liturgical role of the president was formerly limited to the American people, Wilson acted as a pontifex maximus for the broader international community by trying to guide the behavior of the international community.

Wilson also exercised the liturgical role in his emphasis on the theme of charity in international relations. At the end of the second thanksgiving proclamation, Wilson emphasized how the blessings bestowed upon America have positioned the nation “to serve themselves and

⁶⁹ Taft, William H, and Woodrow Wilson. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

⁷⁰ Taft, William H, and Woodrow Wilson. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

mankind.”⁷¹ While Cleveland emphasized the virtue of charity in his thanksgiving proclamations, Wilson expanded this virtue of charity in American civil religion to the broader international community. Therefore, Wilson’s exercise of the liturgical role guides the American people in their view of their position in the broader international community. While charity is the virtue that Wilson tries to instill in the American people, he also attempts to instill international cooperation and peace as virtues in the international community. In Wilson’s 1918 thanksgiving proclamation, he describes how “justice shall replace force and jealous intrigue among the nations.”⁷² Although most presidents prior to Wilson viewed war as a necessary evil to preserve the American people from other countries, he exercised the liturgical role to transform war into a “sin” within the international community. Rather than setting up “sides” in the narrative of the war, with America on the “good” side, Wilson established that the primary evil is not another country, but rather, war itself. He framed America, not as a domineering hegemon in the international community, but rather, as an exemplum for, and a charitable force within the international community.

In his thanksgiving proclamations, Warren G. Harding expanded on the themes of his predecessors’ thanksgiving proclamations, with more of an emphasis on the return to peace. In both of his proclamations, Harding described the importance of charity, but he did not emphasize its significance in international relations in the same way as Wilson. Instead, he exercised the liturgical role in a similar manner to Johnson, who exercised the liturgical role after a war. For example, Harding described the “long period of struggle and turbulence” that the American people have overcome.⁷³ Because he emphasized the struggle the American people had

⁷¹ Taft, William H, and Woodrow Wilson. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

⁷² Taft, William H, and Woodrow Wilson. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

⁷³ Wilson, Woodrow, Warren G Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

overcome, Harding did not emphasize the need for international relations as much as Wilson. However, he transformed America's rise to hegemony in the international community into a part of American civil religion. In his first proclamation, Harding described how America had "been raised up and preserved in national power and consequence, as part of a plan whose wisdom we can not question," thus promoting the narrative of the Americans as God's chosen people.⁷⁴

Calvin Coolidge exercised the liturgical role by focusing on the role of God more than the role of the American people. While Coolidge's more recent predecessors had focused more on influencing the behavior of the American people towards God and others, Coolidge placed more emphasis on how God acts through the American people. In his proclamations, he mentioned that "through divine inspiration we have enlarged our charities and missions."⁷⁵ Coolidge bears more of a resemblance to the presidents prior to the 20th century in their exercise of the liturgical role in his emphasis on a providential God. Although he did not focus as much on altering the behavior of the American people, he does attempt to influence their attitude towards tragic events. For example, in his first thanksgiving proclamation, Coolidge described two tragedies: the death of President Harding and the great earthquake in Japan.⁷⁶ However, he differs from the presidents prior to the 20th century in that he did not frame these unfortunate events as events that should prompt a day of prayer and fasting. Instead, Coolidge reframed the tragedies when he said that "by experiences such as these, men and nations are tested and refined."⁷⁷ This is significant because he was able to include tragic events in his thanksgiving proclamations without having to declare a day of prayer and fasting. Instead, Coolidge was able to help shift the

⁷⁴ Wilson, Woodrow, Warren G Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁷⁵ Wilson, Woodrow, Warren G Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁷⁶ Wilson, Woodrow, Warren G Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁷⁷ Wilson, Woodrow, Warren G Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

attitude of the American people by encouraging them to have resilience. While a day of prayer and fasting might have also built resilience, Coolidge was able to reframe tragic events into events that would make the country stronger. Therefore, Coolidge exercised the liturgical role by encouraging resilience in the face of adversity and emphasizing the role of God.

Herbert Hoover's thanksgiving proclamations focused on the example of past generations and the importance of education and progression towards the future. Hoover emphasized the importance of education for the future in each of his thanksgiving proclamations. For example, in his first thanksgiving proclamation, he described how "educational opportunities have steadily enlarged" and "new experience and new knowledge in many fields have been recorded."⁷⁸ Hoover's inclusion of education in his thanksgiving proclamations is significant because it reframed the American perspective of education. This is significant because he transformed the list of usual blessings. Instead of blessings simply being focused on harvests and industry, Hoover added onto the list of blessings by mentioning education and scientific advancements. He also played on the idea of the fruit of the "fields" by transforming the meaning from agricultural fruit to intellectual fruit. Therefore, Hoover exercised the liturgical role by encouraging the American people to value education and knowledge as gifts bestowed upon the American people by God. Although Hoover did exercise the liturgical role, his exercise of the liturgical role indicates a decline in civil religion. For example, in his last thanksgiving proclamation, he used Washington's thanksgiving proclamation to commemorate Washington's birthday.⁷⁹ This is not a direct rejection of the liturgical role, but his mention of Washington does not further the relationship between the American people and God. Instead, Hoover encourages the American people to revere Washington. In commemorating a historical person within American history,

⁷⁸ Wilson, Woodrow, Warren G Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁷⁹ Hoover, Herbert, and Franklin D Roosevelt. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

without explicitly mentioning God or other religious themes, Hoover's last thanksgiving proclamation lacks the religiosity that would indicate an exercise of the liturgical role.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's thanksgiving proclamations are significant because they focused on guiding the American people in their approach to difficult times within the nation, specifically World War II and the Great Depression. Roosevelt reframed the difficulties of the American people during the Great Depression by guiding them to "be grateful for the passing of dark days" and "for the greater friendship between employers and those who toil."⁸⁰ This is significant because Roosevelt's exercise of the liturgical role resembles Coolidge's. Roosevelt attempted to encourage the American people to be resilient in a time of financial difficulty. He also transformed the blessings within his thanksgiving proclamations. In his first two proclamations, Roosevelt did not mention the blessings commonly mentioned on such occasions. For example, he did not mention the abundant harvest or the advancements in industry, due to the lack of it during the time of the Great Depression. Instead, he turned to "closer fellowship of mutual interest and common purpose" as the gifts of the American people.⁸¹ Furthermore, Roosevelt only mentioned this gift briefly before expressing that the American people ought to lead by example to help other countries. Therefore, his exercise of the liturgical role resembles other presidents in emphasizing the narrative of the American people as a chosen people. Furthermore, Roosevelt's encouragement of the American people to lead by example to help other countries harkens back to Wilson, who encouraged the American people to lead within an international community. This is an exercise of the liturgical role to frame America as a force for charity within the liturgical community.

⁸⁰ Hoover, Herbert, and Franklin D Roosevelt. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁸¹ Hoover, Herbert, and Franklin D Roosevelt. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

Roosevelt's exercise of the liturgical manifested itself more clearly in his thanksgiving proclamation in 1940. This thanksgiving proclamation took place the year after WWII began and at the time, the US had already begun sending supplies to assist the Allies and it was meant to "give thanks for our preservation" when other countries had suffered throughout the year.⁸² In this thanksgiving proclamation, Roosevelt led the American people directly in prayer. While Roosevelt did not have to join the people in prayer or form a prayer, he did so for this thanksgiving proclamation. This is significant because most presidents did not craft and prescribe a verbal prayer for the day of thanksgiving. Therefore, Roosevelt strongly exercises the liturgical role by prescribing specific prayers to the American people.

Roosevelt was also the first president since Lincoln to designate a day of prayer that was not on the specified fourth Thursday of November. In 1942, Roosevelt specified two days of prayer: one on the usual fourth Thursday of November and one on New Year's Day. In this proclamation, Roosevelt indicated that the day of prayer was to give thanks for the year they had entered WWII. This is an unusual approach to proclaiming a day of prayer in a time of war. While Roosevelt's more recent predecessors had encouraged resilience in the war within the thanksgiving proclamation, Roosevelt encouraged, not just resilience, but also gratitude. Therefore, Roosevelt exercised the liturgical role when he encouraged the American people to be grateful for U.S. involvement in WWII. In this proclamation of a day of prayer, Roosevelt resembled the early presidents when he emphasized the American people's "dependence upon Almighty God."⁸³ However, he also transformed the proclamation of a day of prayer by including Psalm 23. This is significant because no other president included a full excerpt from the Book of Psalms or the New Testament. Instead, most presidents would exercise the liturgical role in these

⁸² Roosevelt, Franklin D, and Harry S Truman. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁸³ Roosevelt, Franklin D, and Harry S Truman. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

proclamations by alluding to or using parables from the Bible. This is another “prescription” for prayer on thanksgiving day. Another reason why the inclusion of a psalm, as opposed to a parable, in a thanksgiving proclamation is significant is because the “majority (of psalms) were composed originally precisely for liturgical worship...shown by frequent indication of liturgical leaders interacting with the community.”⁸⁴ This indicates an exercise of the liturgical role because Roosevelt used a psalm meant for worship as a way to guide his own community during a time of trial. Therefore, Roosevelt demonstrates a strong exercise of the liturgical role by including a psalm to encourage resilience in the American people.

This inclusion of excerpts from the Psalms continued in Harry Truman’s thanksgiving proclamations. In two of his thanksgiving proclamations, Truman included psalms. In his first proclamation, Truman used Psalms 33:16-17, which demonstrates how “the greatness of human beings consists in God’s choosing them as a special people and their faithful response.”⁸⁵ However, Truman did not use this psalm to only indicate dependency on God in his thanksgiving proclamation. Instead, after the psalm, Truman described how the American people ought to ask for “divine guidance” for all leaders “in their efforts to promote peace and freedom for all men.”⁸⁶ Truman’s inclusion of the psalm is to indicate a dependence on God, but it also functions as a call to other nations and an exercise of the liturgical role within the international community. By including this psalm in the thanksgiving proclamation, Truman also prescribed reflection on a part of the Old Testament to the American people. This is similar to how Roosevelt led the American people by reciting a prayer that he composed and including a psalm in his proclamation. Therefore, Truman’s inclusion of this psalm in his thanksgiving proclamations is significant because he recommended a specific prayer to guide worship. Truman also used

⁸⁴ “Psalms, THE BOOK OF PSALMS | USCCB.” <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/psalms/0>.

⁸⁵ “Psalms, THE BOOK OF PSALMS | USCCB.” <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/psalms/0>.

⁸⁶ Roosevelt, Franklin D, and Harry S Truman. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

Psalms 136:1-4, which praises God, in his third thanksgiving proclamation.⁸⁷ By including this psalm in his thanksgiving proclamation, Truman exercises the liturgical role by encouraging the American people to praise God, rather than simply their own actions. Furthermore, Truman's exercise of the liturgical is stronger when he incorporates the psalms because they aid his guidance of the American people in praising God.

Dwight Eisenhower's thanksgiving proclamations were significant because they focused on the story of the pilgrims, which shortly after became the primary focus of thanksgiving proclamations. Although presidents in past thanksgiving proclamations had mentioned that the pilgrims set aside one day to give praise to God, they did not make this the focus of every thanksgiving proclamation. However, Eisenhower included the pilgrims' story in each of his thanksgiving proclamations. For example, in his first thanksgiving proclamation, Eisenhower described how "we feel impelled at harvest time to follow the tradition handed down by our Pilgrim Fathers of pausing from our labors for one day to render thanks to Almighty God."⁸⁸ A few of his predecessors, such as Theodore Roosevelt, mentioned how it was the pilgrims who first started the tradition of the thanksgiving day. However, the pilgrim story had only been mentioned in these proclamations in the early 20th century. Therefore, Eisenhower's framing of the Pilgrims as the original fathers of thanksgiving day shifted the tradition of giving thanksgiving. Instead of thanksgiving day presenting presidents with an opportunity to facilitate a relationship between the American people and God, thanksgiving day was now about commemorating a tradition and following the example of the pilgrims.

F. John F. Kennedy

⁸⁷ Truman, Harry S, and Dwight D Eisenhower. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁸⁸ Truman, Harry S, and Dwight D Eisenhower. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

John F. Kennedy's proclamations created the most significant shift in the official meaning of Thanksgiving and the exercise of the liturgical role. While the purpose of thanksgiving proclamations was to thank God annually for national blessings, Kennedy made Thanksgiving Day a day to commemorate the pilgrims' arrival to America and encourage the American people to follow their example. In his first thanksgiving proclamation, Kennedy recalled the pilgrims' example of setting "aside a special day upon which to give thanks to God for their preservation and for the good harvest from the virgin soil upon which they had labored."⁸⁹ This solidified the place of the pilgrims as "saints" in the new American civil religion. By making Thanksgiving about commemorating the pilgrims' arrival, the focus of the exercise of the liturgical role became less about God and more about the American people.

The reason why this establishment of Thanksgiving Day demonstrates an erosion of the liturgical role is because the president no longer needed to lead the American people in prayer. Gradually, presidents did not facilitate the relationship between God and the American people to help the people revere American values. Instead, the president started to celebrate American values without emphasizing God's role in the events throughout American history. Moreover, thanksgiving proclamations would now focus on the example of the pilgrims as individuals coming to the New World for the sake of civil and religious liberty. Even though this might be a significant event in the transcendent framework of American civil religion, it places the focus on the example of the pilgrims in their worship of God, rather than simply being a direct praise of God. This eroded the liturgical role because praise of the pilgrims did not need to be religious. This meant that the presidents could encourage the American people to be constitutional patriots by encouraging them to follow the examples of constitutional patriots prevalent throughout

⁸⁹ Eisenhower, Dwight D, John F Kennedy, Lyndon B Johnson, and Richard Nixon. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

American history. Kennedy's new interpretation of thanksgiving also provided the opportunity for presidents to move away from God and the Judeo-Christian tradition in their proclamations.

G. From Lyndon B. Johnson to Trump

In the proclamations of the presidencies ranging from Lyndon B. Johnson to Trump, presidents reduced their exercise of the liturgical role, in that there was less of an emphasis on the relationship between the nation and God. Presidents no longer focused on guiding the American people in prayer, but rather, they focused on living up to a legacy and upholding American values. In this period, presidents further emphasized the pilgrims' Thanksgiving feast story, in which the pilgrims came to the United States and feasted with the Native Americans. Furthermore, presidents also emphasized the specific values of diversity and cooperation, rather than pointing to the material bounty and blessings of the country. Although these presidents encouraged the reverence of American values, myths and founding documents, these presidents gradually began to do so without the use of the Judeo-Christian tradition and other religious allusions.

Lyndon B. Johnson thanksgiving proclamations indicated a shift in the interpretation of the thanksgiving proclamation during the period after Kennedy. In his first thanksgiving proclamation, Johnson mentioned the pilgrim story, but he also described rights available to the American people. For example, he emphasized that American principles, such as "our freedom of speech, our freedom of the press and our freedom to worship as our conscience dictates" made the American people unique.⁹⁰ This is significant because Johnson exercised the liturgical role by emphasizing how the American people are a "chosen people." However, Johnson's exercise of the liturgical role was not as strong as his predecessors' exercise because he did not guide the

⁹⁰ Eisenhower, Dwight D, John F Kennedy, Lyndon B Johnson, and Richard Nixon. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

American people in prayer or praise God profusely. In addition, he did not attribute the American people's greatness specifically to God, but rather, to the principles enshrined in the Bill of Rights. Therefore, Johnson exercised the liturgical role by making the Bill of Rights a kind of sacred document within American civil religion. Johnson's proclamations also indicate a weak exercise of the liturgical role because he emphasized the values of the American people without religious allusions. However, Johnson still guided the American people to be constitutional patriots by enshrining the Bill of Rights within the thanksgiving proclamation. Johnson's liturgical role demonstrates how presidents began to encourage constitutional patriotism without having to allude to religion as much as previous presidents.

During his presidency, Nixon had four proclamations in which he encouraged the American people to revere past historical figures and follow their example in how they lived out American values. In his first proclamation, Nixon attempted to unify the nation and craft the narrative of America's strength during the Vietnam War. In the second Thanksgiving proclamation, Nixon focused on the pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock and their search for a place to "live out their own commitment to their own ideal of human freedom."⁹¹ His description of the pilgrims presented the American people with a way to follow their example and live out the American ideal of freedom. In Nixon's third proclamation, instead of pointing to the pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock, the theme of his proclamation is words and deeds of gratitude. His third proclamation also compared "Moses at the Red Sea" to "Washington kneeling at Valley Forge."⁹² Although this further crafted another image within American civil religion, it also established Washington as a kind of Moses figure in American civil religion. Therefore, Nixon

⁹¹ Nixon, Richard, Gerald R Ford, and Jimmy Carter. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS." *RICHARD NIXON*.

⁹² Nixon, Richard, Gerald R Ford, and Jimmy Carter. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS." *RICHARD NIXON*.

emphasized Americans as the heirs of a Judeo-Christian tradition in this proclamation. In his last Thanksgiving proclamation, Nixon did not mention the nation's struggle or the Vietnam War. Instead, Nixon turned the attention of the proclamation to the tenth anniversary of Kennedy's assassination. This also frames Kennedy's assassination as another major event within American civil religion. Therefore, Nixon's exercise of the liturgical role is similar to Carter's exercise of the liturgical role in that it encourages a reverence for past presidents and contemporary events.

Gerald Ford had three Thanksgiving proclamations in which he encouraged a similar reverence for American values. In his first thanksgiving proclamation, Ford stated that "the fundamental meaning of Thanksgiving remains the same" and it is "when the differences of a diverse people are forgotten and all Americans join in giving thanks to God."⁹³ This is significant because Ford redefined the meaning of Thanksgiving. While thanksgiving had been a prayer to God for any set of intentions, Ford transformed it into a holiday that celebrates unity and diversity. Although this definition still includes giving thanks to God, it also added on the act of unification to the thanksgiving proclamation. Therefore, he exercised the liturgical role by attempting to unify the American people in the tradition of Thanksgiving. However, his exercise of this liturgical role is weakened due to his emphasis on tradition and myth without much reference to God. Ford's thanksgiving proclamations are also significant because they incorporated contemporary events into the transcendent framework of American civil religion. Ford also included the achievement of the moon landing as another central event in his first Thanksgiving proclamation. He described how America is a "civilization whose farthest reach was once the earth's uncharted seas has now plumbed the secrets of outer space."⁹⁴ This is

⁹³ Nixon, Richard, Gerald R Ford, and Jimmy Carter. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS." *RICHARD NIXON*.

⁹⁴ Nixon, Richard, Gerald R Ford, and Jimmy Carter. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS." *RICHARD NIXON*.

significant because it makes the exploration of outer space a contemporary event that distinguishes Americans from other civilizations. Americans could reference this as part of why they are the “city upon the hill.” It also emphasizes how the American people are “heirs” to the pilgrim myth. This description of the exploration of outer space resembles McKinley’s “American empire” in his thanksgiving proclamations. Therefore, Ford uses the liturgical role in his emphasis on the uniqueness and hegemony of America in their space exploration.

Jimmy Carter’s proclamations also demonstrate the decline of civil religion and the shift in how the American people ought to perceive themselves. In his first proclamation, Carter reinforced the story of Thanksgiving by stating that it was a “commemoration – of the day America’s earliest inhabitants sat down to table with European colonists.”⁹⁵ Carter’s description of Thanksgiving provided a new lens with which to look at the day of Thanksgiving. Instead of Thanksgiving being a day of prayer to thank God for the blessings of the year, Thanksgiving would now be the day that the colonists and native Americans sat down to table. Carter did not simply emphasize how the pilgrims prayed to God, but rather, he emphasized how the pilgrims interacted with the natives. He also characterized Thanksgiving as “a national tradition of cooperation, unity and tolerance.”⁹⁶ Although this might not seem like a decline in the liturgical role, Carter shifted the worship away from God to a worship of the values of “cooperation, unity and tolerance.” Rather than using Biblical verses and psalms to encourage *pietas*, Carter used the pilgrims’ example to influence the behavior of the American people. Therefore, Carter’s thanksgiving proclamations resemble Johnson’s proclamations in that they enshrine the values

⁹⁵ Nixon, Richard, Gerald R Ford, and Jimmy Carter. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.” *RICHARD NIXON*.

⁹⁶ Nixon, Richard, Gerald R Ford, and Jimmy Carter. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.” *RICHARD NIXON*.

from the pilgrim myth, rather than guiding the American people in prayer like the proclamations of past presidents.

In contrast to the proclamations of this period, Ronald Reagan's thanksgiving proclamations demonstrate his gradual increase in his exercise of the liturgical role. In his first term as president, Reagan followed the example of his more recent predecessors and encouraged the American people to follow the example of the pilgrims. In his second term, Reagan demonstrated a stronger exercise of the liturgical role. Each of Reagan's thanksgiving proclamations built on the examples of the early thanksgiving proclamations. Throughout these proclamations, Reagan referenced past presidents, specifically Washington, Lincoln and Cleveland. For example, Reagan used a line from Washington's thanksgiving proclamations.⁹⁷ Reagan even used patriotic songs in each one of his proclamations. In his sixth thanksgiving proclamation, Reagan incorporated one of the stanzas from "America the Beautiful."⁹⁸ This is significant because Reagan added to the liturgy of American civil religion. By using different patriotic songs and songs from Christian churches, Reagan added another dimension to the liturgical role. Prior to Reagan, most presidents did not include the lyrics of patriotic songs in their thanksgiving addresses. Therefore, Reagan takes the musical element of American civil religion and makes it part of the liturgical role of the president. Furthermore, Reagan also transformed patriotic songs into sacred songs. This use of past proclamations and patriotic songs presented a new way for presidents to exercise the liturgical role and encourage reverence in the American people without completely breaking from the Judeo-Christian tradition.

⁹⁷ Carter, Jimmy, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

⁹⁸ Carter, Jimmy, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

In his thanksgiving proclamations, George Bush demonstrated a strong exercise of the liturgical role. Throughout his thanksgiving proclamations, Bush referred to the pilgrim myth and the American values derived from it. He also described contemporary events through the lens of the pilgrims. For example, Bush stated how “on Thanksgiving Day...the seeds of democratic thought sown on these shores continue to take root in the world.”⁹⁹ During his presidency, the Soviet Union fell. Bush’s proclamation demonstrates how he did not want the American people to interpret the fall of the Soviet Union as merely another contemporary event. Rather, he made it part of the American people’s mission to promote democracy in other countries by including it in his thanksgiving proclamation. By including this description of the fall of the Soviet Union in a proclamation of thanksgiving, Bush framed communism as a kind of “enemy” or “sin” against democracy. He went a step further than his recent predecessors and described a mission that comes with the pilgrim myth. Bush’s exercise of the liturgical role is also stronger because he is one of the few recent presidents to lead the American people in prayer. One example of this is when Bush included psalms in his proclamations. Bush resembles Franklin D. Roosevelt and Truman in his inclusion of various psalms throughout his thanksgiving proclamation because he guides the way in which Americans ought to give thanks and perceive their inherited mission from the pilgrims. Therefore, Bush strongly exercises the liturgical role by emphasizing the mission of the American people and guiding their prayer and behavior on Thanksgiving Day.

Unlike Bush’s thanksgiving proclamations, Bill Clinton’s thanksgiving proclamations did not demonstrate an exercise of the liturgical role to promote American values. This is because Clinton focused on the American people’s “bond with the men and women who first proclaimed

⁹⁹ Bush, George, and William J Clinton. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

Thanksgiving in our land.”¹⁰⁰ Like his recent predecessors, Clinton did not focus on a bond between the American people and God, but rather, the American people and the pilgrims’ legacy. Although the presidents of this period also focused on the pilgrims’ legacy and the mission of the American people, Clinton’s exercise of the liturgical role is weaker because he did not allude to the Bible or prescribe prayers. Instead, Clinton only emphasized the mission of the American people to “widen the circle of opportunity, break down the prejudices that alienate us from one another, and build an America of understanding and inclusion.”¹⁰¹ This is similar to how Carter used the liturgical role to emphasize the values of diversity and inclusion. Clinton guided the American people towards a respect for diversity, but he did not really build a reverence for the Constitution and the values typically referenced in thanksgiving proclamations. He used American history to give the American people an example to respect others. Therefore, Clinton guided the behavior of the American people towards one another, but he did not attempt to establish a bond between the Americans and God.

George W. Bush’s thanksgiving proclamations indicated a lack of exercise of the liturgical role, which resembled Clinton. Throughout his proclamations, Bush placed more emphasis on the unity and diversity of the American people with the pilgrim myth. This is surprising because one would expect Bush to use the liturgical role in a way that resembled other presidents in times of war, especially after the events of 9/11. For example, Bush’s predecessors might have used more Biblical allusions and other Judeo-Christian elements in response to an attack from Islamic extremists. However, he did not use religious allusions in his response to the 9/11 attacks.¹⁰² Instead, he expressed gratitude towards the groups of firefighters, policemen,

¹⁰⁰ Bush, George, and William J Clinton. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

¹⁰¹ Bush, George, and William J Clinton. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

¹⁰² Clinton, William J, and George W Bush. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

homeland security and intelligence personnel who “responded in service to others.”¹⁰³ Bush transformed the thanksgiving proclamation by describing how the American people were already fulfilling their mission and following the pilgrims’ example. By thanking the groups of Americans for making several sacrifices, Bush also demonstrated that the American people are an exemplum and the “city upon a hill” without having to refer to any religion. This is significant because Bush’s proclamations no longer emphasized a dependence upon God for deliverance or for the strength to persevere in the face of hardship.

Barack Obama did not exercise the liturgical role in his proclamations. Much like his recent predecessors, Obama focused on the values of diversity and unity through the pilgrim story. His thanksgiving proclamations no longer established any relationship between the American people and God, but rather, they limited God to historical events. They also indicate that the purpose of the pilgrim myth had evolved from following their example of giving thanks to God to giving thanks to one another and reaching out to diverse groups of people. This resembles presidents, like Wilson, who encouraged unity and peaceful cooperation between nations under God. Contemporary presidents would now focus on fostering unity and cooperation between different peoples within the United States. Obama also included excerpts from presidential thanksgiving proclamations in his own proclamations. His inclusion of these excerpts is meant to encourage the American people to “draw strength from the resolve of previous generations who faced their struggles.”¹⁰⁴ Therefore, he uses American history to guide the American people in their behavior, but he does not make religious allusions to revere American history and values.

¹⁰³ Clinton, William J, and George W Bush. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

¹⁰⁴ Clinton, William J, and George W Bush. “PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS.”

Donald Trump's thanksgiving proclamations also indicate that he did not use the liturgical role to encourage constitutional patriotism. In his first proclamation, Trump described the pilgrims' story and the history of the thanksgiving proclamation. He pointed out that it was Lincoln who established that Thanksgiving be given on a specific day and included quotes from Lincoln and Washington in their first thanksgiving proclamations.¹⁰⁵ Although Trump did mention the specific events in American history, he did not exercise the liturgical role. In fact, he barely mentioned God within the thanksgiving proclamation or expressed that the American people should give thanks to God. Much like Obama, Trump focused on giving thanks to the specific groups of Americans who had served the nation. While Bush thanked different groups of people in the midst of a crisis, Trump thanked groups, such as active soldiers and veterans, who were more likely to be part of his voter demographic. Thanking groups of people, such as active soldiers, could be considered part of the civil religion. However, he does not frame these soldiers within a transcendent framework by comparing them to soldiers of the past or even the pilgrims.

H. Ending with Biden

Biden's thanksgiving proclamations, especially his latest proclamation, demonstrate the total decline of American civil religion and the liturgical role. In his first proclamation, he only described the history of Thanksgiving and the examples of Washington and Lincoln in giving thanks to God. However, Biden did not follow up with a prescribed prayer, or even a list of blessings which he attributed to God. Instead, Biden thanked the groups of Americans who served the country, such as "scientists, researchers, doctors and nurses who kept us safe through a pandemic."¹⁰⁶ This is similar to how Bush thanked the soldiers and firefighters after the attacks on 9/11. Although the pandemic was a significant event, Biden did not frame the groups of

¹⁰⁵ Obama, Barack and Donald Trump. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS." *BARACK OBAMA*.

¹⁰⁶ Trump, Donald J, and Joseph R Biden. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS."

scientists and researchers within American civil religion. Biden's predecessors would have given thanks to God for the end of a pandemic and referring to the Biblical "plague" and "pestilence" in their proclamations. However, he did not use this proclamation as an opportunity to encourage reverence for American values and history. He acknowledged the pandemic as an "unprecedented" event, but he did not draw parallels between the pandemic and other significant events in American history. Biden did not even encourage the American people to revere the past in his proclamations. His mention of the pilgrims' story was only to serve as a reminder of why we have the holiday. Therefore, the connection between the pilgrims' story and the American people has also dissolved over time.

The most recent thanksgiving proclamation was devoid of any indication of civil religion. While the story of the pilgrims had functioned as an example for the American people, the pilgrim myth in Biden's proclamation was only mentioned twice and was not richly described as a cooperation between peoples or appreciation of diversity. This indicates that the proclamation no longer served as a way for the presidents to encourage the American people to respect American values and revere the country. Biden described the pilgrims' story as the pilgrims celebrating "Thanksgiving in honor of their first successful harvest and the support and generosity of the Wampanoag people who made it possible."¹⁰⁷ This is significant because Biden compresses the pilgrim myth and limits the themes to support and generosity. Biden presents the story of the pilgrims as merely a feast in his proclamation, which is only the commercialized view of Thanksgiving. He does not use the story of the pilgrims as a tool to influence the behavior of the American people.

4. Conclusion

¹⁰⁷ Biden, Joseph R. "PRESIDENTIAL THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATION."

Although the decline of the president's liturgical role in thanksgiving proclamations is interesting, these proclamations are not the sole source for research of the liturgical role. One potential area for future research is the examination of the liturgical role in inaugural addresses. Inaugural addresses specify how each president will uphold their oath of office. Much like the Thanksgiving address, the inaugural address presents the president with the opportunity to allude to the Bible to advance their agenda. While the thanksgiving proclamations focus on an attitude of gratitude for the history of the nation and the legacy of the pilgrims, the inaugural addresses tend to focus more on the future of the presidency. The analysis of inaugural addresses could reveal more about how presidents use civil religion for their own agendas.

The decline of the liturgical role indicated in presidential thanksgiving proclamations demonstrates the weakness, or even death, of American civil religion, since without the liturgical role, there is no civil religion. If the president no longer attempts to establish a relationship between the American people and a higher authority, then this could result in a lack of reverence for American ideals, founding documents and history. Therefore, without civil religion, it is difficult, if not impossible, to encourage Americans to be constitutional patriots.

This decline also raises the question of what will replace civil religion in unifying the American people and providing presidents with an opportunity to legitimize and promote their agendas. In fact, one can argue that America is starting to resemble France in its *laicite*, which is the exclusion of religion from government and overt religious symbols in the public sphere. France appears to be able to influence its citizens without the same need to adhere to their constitution and the president's policies. However, France and America differ in their history regarding religion in the public sphere and in their approach to constitutions, which can influence whether a country needs civil religion for constitutional patriotism. While France's constitution

seems flexible, America's Constitution is considered a sacred document that cannot, and in some cases, should not, change.

Even though society has become increasingly secularized and religion does not have the same influence in the world, the decline of the liturgical role demonstrates religion's unique ability to unify and mobilize people. The lack of civil religion could be one of the reasons why there is intense division among the American people. After all, American presidents have not used any tools resembling civil religion to try to unite the people behind a particular set of policies. Perhaps, even in a pluralistic society, civil religion still possesses the potential to unite us.

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