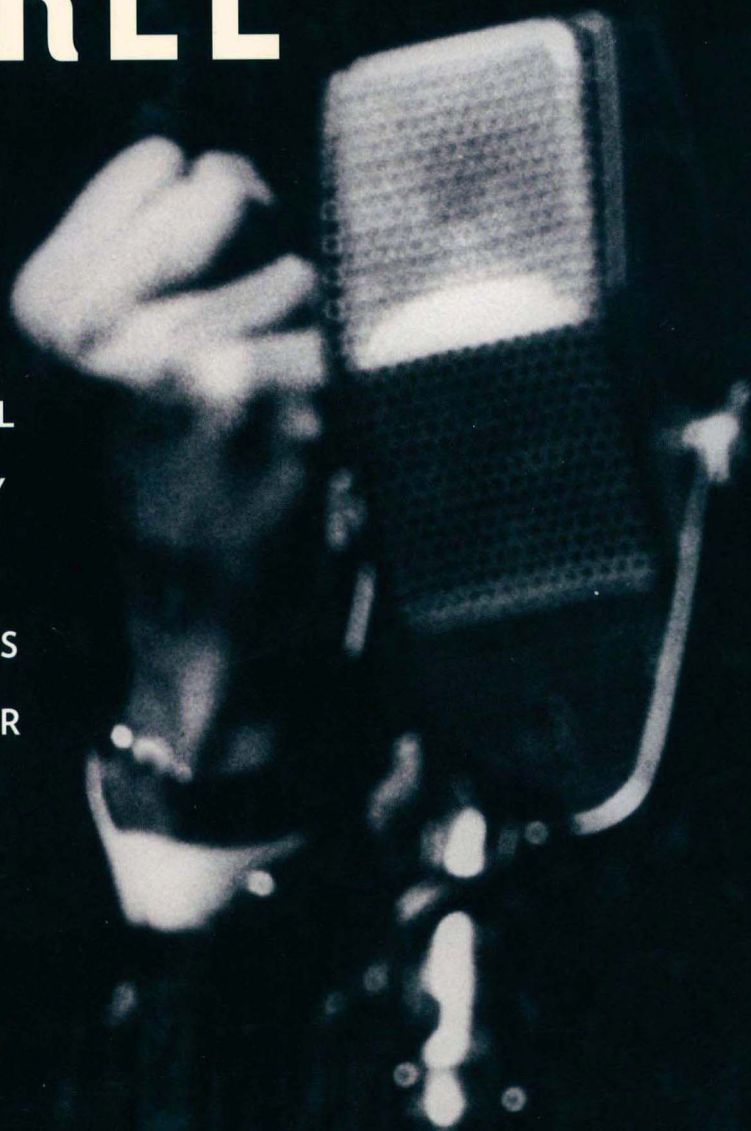


JASON W. STEVENS

GOD-FEARING AND FREE

A
SPIRITUAL
HISTORY
OF
AMERICA'S
COLD WAR



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A Spritual History of America's Cold War

JASON W. STEVENS



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God-Fearing and Free

Prologue

THIS BOOK will help no one to win an election. It will not help to defeat the Christian Right. It will offer no lessons to the secular Left. It will not, in short, polemicize on either side of the so-called Culture War.

It will help us to understand how these very polemics are themselves artifacts of discourses forged in the Cold War. The American public, powered by a national religious revival, was purposefully disillusioned regarding the country's mythical innocence and thus fortified for an epochal struggle with totalitarianism. I have endeavored in this book, by combining cultural, intellectual, and religious history, to capture the ethos of America during the last period in which its leaders, ministers, and savants would regularly proclaim that the nation was not free of sin, and in the first period when the nation, teetering between patriotic adulation and doubt about the global future, would become a superpower. Throughout these years, Americans represented both private and public life through a language of iniquity, guilt, and expiation that intentionally echoed the nation's past religious awakenings.

Key writers and filmmakers played crucial roles both in shaping and in challenging the theological critique of America's mythic innocence during the Cold War. This critique was contiguous with, and very much involved in, midcentury ruminations on the meaning of American force, the responsibility of its citizens, and the future of the globe that Henry Luce had claimed for "The American Century." These writers and filmmakers ex-

plored whether an orthodox or a modernized form of Christianity was best suited to diagnose frailties internal to the nation as it girded for global responsibilities. Covering a wide selection of narrative and cultural forms—including theology, revivalism, fiction, film noir, liberal conscience movies, Gothic romances, sentimental melodrama, journalism, and confessional biography—I demonstrate how these thinkers succeeded in spotlighting the irony of America's effort to revive faith when the country appeared to have already transferred many religious beliefs and functions to secular contexts, even as institutional religion had become increasingly penetrated by nationalism, mass opinion, the human sciences, and culture. "Culture," in this sense, included especially the arts but was broadly conceived as the sphere of human action, invention, and persuasion.

Prior scholars have written amply on the interplay between Christianity and cultural production in previous eras of American history, but my study is the first comparable project undertaken for 1947–1965, a period in which America underwent its last major religious revival. Increasingly, people interested in our struggles between religious movements and institutions want to know if the current role of faith in American life and American policy is a new development or in continuity with the past. My work argues for continuity, tracing the history of the present to the Cold War era's political and philosophical reaction to Protestant "modernism," the belief that an engaged Christianity must look to cultural expression and political realities for sources of religious revelation, inspiration, and provocation. This was the avant-garde of liberal Christianity. It is in the context of the Cold War that the critical reaction to Protestant modernism, or "counter-modernism," initially forged in the twenties and thirties, led to coalitions forecasting contemporary "culture war" alignments. The terms of a master narrative for American vocation were formed, as modernism was renounced, along with the country's innocence, in the name of forcing the United States to rediscover its own capabilities for evil as well as the evils of its enemies. There was more than one strain of countermodernism, taking forms neo-fundamentalistic evangelical, European-flavored neoorthodox, Jewish prophetic, conservative Catholic, and most prominently the tragic realist, favored by secular ex-radical intellectuals as well as liberals of both Protestant and Jewish persuasions. While I will be situating each, I will be devoting particular attention to the neofundamentalists, exemplified here by Billy Graham, and the tragic realists, epitomized by Reinhold Niebuhr, since the rise of the former must be understood as an effect, partly, of the dystopian recalibration of liberalism under the latter.

The process of cultural repudiation and revaluation I am describing has had ramifications beyond its origins because the Cold War, or, more pre-

cisely, the moral and spiritual meanings of the Cold War, have persistently been revived to define American identity, purpose, and power in moments of perceived crisis as well as triumph. By the 1973 cease-fire, the United States had not only lost the Vietnam War but had also severely weakened its economy and lost European sanction for its objectives in Asia and the Middle East. Internally, it had become difficult to justify America's global foreign policy as a moral and even religious obligation, and the long-term interests of the country did not seem to be served by its tax burdens and international blowback. Kissinger and Nixon's realpolitik and nonmoralistic tone were designed to stress the balance of power, rather than anti-Communism, by stabilizing Europe and diplomatically acknowledging China, though neither Washington nor Moscow ever promised or intended detente to mean lasting peace. The Helsinki Treaties (1975), by codifying the European borders of 1945, marked the growth of normalizing trade and cultural links between the superpowers even as new fronts were opened in Afghanistan and Africa. Soviet expansion and human rights violations, combining with post-1967 Israeli-Arab tensions, the assumption of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, a stagnant economy, and the oil crisis, stirred a new militancy in Britain and the United States, where hawks perceived detente as a strategy of weakness and appeasement. In a reprise of John Foster Dulles's pledge to "roll back" Communist advances, Reagan and Thatcher opened a New Cold War, inaugurated in 1982 by Reagan's "evil empire" speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, which shared his opposition to a nuclear freeze.¹ From 1981 to 1989, the Religious Right coalesced with neoconservatives, invoking the early Cold War and yoking that conflict with totalitarianism to the burgeoning culture war, even arguing, as did Irving Kristol in his 1993 editorial for the *National Interest*, "My Cold War," that the war over values, for the nation's soul, was the continuation of the true Cold War: the battle with "the liberal ethos."²

In the 1980s the manicheism of Reagan's vision, and his administration's ties with figures such as Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Tim LaHaye, and Jerry Falwell, summoned nostalgia for the "Christian realism" of Reinhold Niebuhr, as George W. Bush's righteousness, with its own invocations of the Cold War, has since 9/11. My project was motivated by the question of what exactly liberals have been identifying as an object of nostalgia. The countermodernist realism Niebuhr sponsored, as applied in the Cold War, has had a mingled legacy. Its discourses of tragedy and framing of dire choices of "lesser evils," its allegations of the errors of the Red Decade, its foreswearing of utopia, its criticisms of Enlightenment and liberal humanism, its secularization theses relying on encumbering notions of

cultural debt and alienation, its pessimistic justifications for relying on consensus and the rule of law, its apologies for American imperialism—these too it has imparted with as much consequence as its touted, yet ultimately soft, critique of Wilsonian idealism and jingoistic nationalism. The long-term effects of realism cannot be fully measured, moreover, by focusing on only the repercussions of diplomacy or policy decisions. Its ideas, alongside others, competed for hegemony within a constellation of beliefs, arts, institutions, communicative practices, and structures of feeling. These afforded a synergy of talent and available discursive formations in which some ideas and modes of expression became stanchions of the Cold War's master narrative, which advised an end to innocence, while other ideas and expressive modes were submerged or driven into temporary exile. I have therefore represented the moral, spiritual, and theological meanings of the Cold War as a dynamic interplay between that period's reflections on the problem of evil and its meditations on the motif of innocence—innocence wished for, innocence lost, innocence imagined, innocence feared, innocence repudiated, innocence forgiven, innocence reconstituted. The imagery of innocence that was associated, in both hopeful and ironic attitudes, with the United States itself—as Eden, as the Garden of the New World—was rife with Judeo-Christian themes for mid-twentieth-century Americans, and the most pronounced of these themes in the Cold War was the biblical problem of sin. Organizing the book around this motif, rather than lines of Right and Left, has allowed me to move the interpretation among texts, and figures, normally isolated from one another and to demonstrate continuities among these texts as well as underappreciated nuances within them.

Much of the language of these texts has become associated with fundamentalism in our time, but during the Cold War, original sin, the Last Judgment, and the problem of moral evil were topical for intellectuals and writers of many persuasions. This is a rhetoric that some liberals today respect for its “toughness” and “complexity.” Yet is it worth recovering, even as a counter to fundamentalism's monopolization of Judeo-Christian language in public discourse today? The evangelical Left activist Jim Wallis, in *God's Politics* (2005), tells us that we need a “return to some old-time religion,” but the fundamentalist enthusiasm over George W. Bush's use of the word “evil,” as if it were a repudiation of the whole culture of postmodernism, surely cautions that this kind of theological language, as liberal icon Reinhold Niebuhr himself suggested in his 1960 preface to *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, may be too liable to misinterpretation and misapplication for progressive democratic voices to communicate their goals and values.³ The American propensity to conduct cultural life through

religious symbols was never more pronounced in the twentieth century than during the Cold War; never since has the meaning of religious terms, such as original sin, been more widely analyzed, more sharply contested, because of their bearings on national character and democratic culture. I propose that to answer the question “Is such theological language flexible enough for appropriation today?” we must consider the range of effects it had on American culture in the Cold War and the tendencies that that period has deposited into America’s historical and literary imagination. It has been said that a good conscience is the invention of the devil.⁴ The master narrative I am describing—that America must relinquish its illusions of innocence in order to behave responsibly in a world where there are no clean hands—is not an intrinsically pernicious one. It became pernicious, however, in its specific Cold War applications.

Since I am concerned with the legacy of the Cold War period’s consciousness upon our own, more religiously polarized environment, I devote much space to exploring the ways that liberals and evangelicals came to view each other in the fifties. The figures who are generally seen as the progressive heroes of this moment—men such as Reinhold Niebuhr—in fact bear much responsibility for the erosion of liberal Christianity, as they opened it to redoubled attacks from fundamentalism. According to received scholarly wisdom, the neoorthodox or realist voices were the countervailing prophetic opinion to American nationalism and fundamentalism, but, in fact, they did not truly represent dissent. My adoption of the term “countermodernist” is designed therefore to invite comparisons between figures such as Niebuhr and Billy Graham, who are usually contrasted with each other. By drawing these generally unsought and overlooked points of comparison, I challenge scholarly distinctions between the “elite/academic/resistant” and the “popular/normative/dominant.” Niebuhr was not a courageously dissenting voice as he has been portrayed, nor was Graham simply a bland and assimilable evangelist fit for the Eisenhower era. Indeed, Graham’s rise was facilitated by the brand of reformed liberalism that Niebuhr’s generation proffered as an alternative to American innocence.

For better or worse, it seems that we are in a moment when intellectuals cannot simply say, “Kill the gods already.” If, as Habermas urges in *Dialectics of Secularization* (2005), intellectuals today have a responsibility to explicate for secular culture the nourishing ideas in religions, recognizing that these are among “the prepolitical supports” of liberal societies, then they must be especially sensitive to the way religions have sought to translate secular culture, whether for apologetic tasks or for the renovation of tradition. This book does not, therefore, foreclose prematurely on modes of discourse, but seeks fruitful points of overlap between concepts of the

secular and of the religious. One of the keynotes of the modernist movement was the idea that secular culture can be a source of revelation to American religion. The movement had its failings and oversights, and I do not propose that we bypass the countermodernist critique in order to return to what preceded it. Instead, we must consider what was jettisoned and what was preserved in the critique, the rationale for distinguishing the secular and the religious that the countermodernists offered, and how that rationale came to imbricate forces of opinion and institutional structures that now strike us as unhelpful, if not dangerous, given our present climate of cultural warfare. Throughout, the reader will gather that I sympathize more with America's progressive than with its conservative tradition, and that I believe Cold War tragic realism led Americans astray politically and set dubious ethical precedents. Still, there are no heroes in this narrative, nor are there villains. There are voices giving provisional answers to questions generated in the communicative context of the Cold War; some of these answers are still operative today and others are in abeyance—though quite likely to be reactivated if present trends persist.

The book consists of five parts, each dealing with a salient aspect of Cold War discourse: theology, confession, cultural politics, psychology, and prophesy. Their sequence is thematic rather than chronological, and there is chronological overlap between each part, but the time covered in the entire presentation goes no further than the period immediately prior to detente. The New Cold War of the eighties and its long repercussions for the current "war on terror" are beyond the scope of this study, though long-range connections are, I hope, foreshadowed in the book's reflection on the Cold War from 1945 through the Vietnam period. The argument begins by constructing the crucial intellectual and religious precedents for the reclamation of Christianity, tracing it to the critiques of Protestant modernism in the twenties and the conceptualization of totalitarianism as "political religion," or "secular religion," in the thirties and describing how both countermodernism and the political religion diagnosis were refurbished and subtly transformed in the Cold War. The argument then looks ahead to the sixties' widespread rejection, and reversal, of the terms of the earlier decade's religious revival, particularly original sin and related post-Edenic motifs. An America that began the postwar era in a nationwide religious revival turned then to meet the Vietnam era with another type of spiritual awakening, one having its own political implications. With this awakening ensued a new struggle over the symbolic meaning of the Cold War. The young dissidents who made up the counterculture and the New Left wanted to escape the guilt of their liberal fathers, what they saw as the guilt suffusing the conduct of the Cold War. I conclude by reflecting on the continuing

implications of the Cold War's "end of innocence" master narrative for today's culture wars between liberalism and fundamentalism.

What follows accepts that we have been historically determined by conversations from the directions both of religion and of Enlightenment. I have concerned myself with theology because its contributions to American thought have been unevenly assessed by both sides in a culture war that has occluded more than it has elucidated about the continuing role of faith in this nation. The Calvinist liberal and Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Marilynne Robinson has said in *The Death of Adam* (2005), "We have entered a period of nostalgia and reaction. We want the past back, though we have no idea what it was."⁵ Moved by this remark, I would like, by way of an equally spiritual American author, to make a connection that might strike Robinson as unholy, though it is not, I think, inapt. Brion Gysin, William S. Burroughs's frequent collaborator, once explained his purpose by stating, "I've come to free the words,"⁶ referring to the way languages become hardwired to program our reactions to things we believe that we already know. If this book in some small way succeeds in freeing the theological discourses highlighted here from programmed responses on both the Right and the Left, then this project will have done its service.

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Introduction: Going beyond Modernism from World War I to the Cold War

The Evil I Would Not, I Do: Protestant Self-Reflection and a Post-Edenic America

Once the My Lai Massacre became public in 1969, *Time* magazine devoted its December cover story to the incident, calling it an "American Tragedy." Folded into the coverage was a feature editorial, "On Evil: The Inescapable Fact," which urged Americans to stop protesting their innocence in the face of such a manifest betrayal of their country's "idealism."¹ The centerpiece of the editorial is a cartoon, titled "The Other Side," showing a hand pointing to its inverted reflection; the mirrored hand, labeled "ATROCITIES," is covered with Guilt, represented as a black slime that drips from the pointed forefinger, which aims back at its accuser. The editorial sets out to explain the contradiction between America's image of itself and the revelation of the events at My Lai.

The editorial gives a curtailed view of American religious history, singling out the Puritans, the pragmatists, and the "young radicals" of the sixties as moral types. Americans, we are told, lost the lesson of the Fall, but retained the Puritans' belief in election, so that over time they have developed an unbounded optimism in human potential: "evil exists in institutions rather than men, and can therefore be legislated away . . . dissected and analyzed . . . exorcised through education." From describing maladies of the American character, the editorial expands to describe the predicament of mankind.

Man has an enemy within his nature that he denies by imagining evil as if it were a “Wholly Other” to be detested; Hitler, we are told, has served this function for many Americans. The country’s failing, it seems, has lain less in positive expressions of evil, such as “the despoliation of the Indian, or the subjection of the black,” than in its susceptibility to “Pelagian” philosophies and patriotic myths that have covered over “the persistent dark element in man.” Thus the nation has much too eagerly sought to prove its virtue by doing battle with external figures of injustice.²

As in Reinhold Niebuhr’s *The Irony of American History* (1952), Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.’s *The Vital Center* (1949), R. W. B. Lewis’s *The American Adam* (1955), and other classic Cold War statements on the American character, the traits of innocence, optimism, and idealism seem to imply each other, and all three appear to be definitively American weaknesses.³ Although the *Time* editorial several times mentions “a dark underside to American history,” which, when dredged into light, tends to elicit a “‘Who, me?’” reaction from citizens, it gives more space to lamenting Pelagian views of sin, which America has supposedly internalized, than it does to scrutinizing the vicissitudes of the nation’s counterinsurgency policy in Indochina. The antiwar young radicals, in particular, are singled out for being “typically American” in that they fail to recognize how good and evil are inseparably intertwined. The editorial closes by admonishing and exhorting the nation to practice honest self-reflection:

According to Christian moral theology, the self-awareness of sin and guilt is a necessary prologue to sanctity. . . . Individuals are not identical with nations, but sometimes they are analogous. And thus it can be argued that only the nation that has faced up to its own failings and acknowledged its capacities for evil and ill-doing has any real claim to greatness.

If Americans can look inward even as they look at their past, then they may be saved from crisis. They cannot be freed of guilt, but they may learn to live without innocence; if they acknowledge their capacity for evil, then they will be less guilty than their enemies. They may even achieve relative virtuousness.

Twenty years earlier, *Time* magazine had named Reinhold Niebuhr America’s “leading establishment theologian” and Billy Graham had launched his star-making Los Angeles revival, and only twenty-three years earlier American diplomat George Kennan had written his influential “Long Telegram” in the form, he later said, of “a seventeenth century Protestant sermon.”⁴ For over two decades, spanning the end of World War II and the onset and escalation of the Cold War, Americans had been urged to lose their innocence. This period was the last time when Americans became versed in the lesson

that they were not only favored by God but also under his judgment; it was also the time when the nation, applying the lessons of its re-education in the vicissitudes of sin and grace, became a superpower. During the sixties, the counterculture and sundry activist movements—populist, New Left, and civil rights oriented—had turned to alternative forms of religious self-exploration, often in explicit repudiation of the prior generation's symbols of original sin and the Last Judgment, but the call to end American innocence could still be mobilized, as *Time* illustrated in December 1969, to allege that the most optimistic of nations had occasioned evil because of its people's very idealism.

The Cold War was not the first period in which Americans said that their innocence had ended. In the 1920s, self-critical liberal theologians and writers, based in U.S. metropolitan centers, together believed, with some conceit, that they were the first post-Revolutionary American generation to be skeptical about human progress.⁵ The post-World War II generation inherited the theme of an end to national innocence, but, by contrast with their forebears in the twenties, their situation was distinguished by a cultural religious revival, which had as one of its key features a revaluation of original sin, the Christian doctrine that Augustine minted in his early fifth-century masterwork, *The City of God*.⁶ In the shadow of concerns about the spread of totalitarian systems, original sin was refurbished and then mobilized in a variety of cultural discourses that aimed to shore up democratic society against threats preying on the nation's internal weaknesses. As the concept of original sin migrated, it generated accounts of evil in which the idea of innocence took on a counterintuitive meaning; instead of signifying clear conscience or guilelessness, innocence became instead a synonym for totalitarian ideologies of the fascist right or the Communist left, with which certain veins of America's heritage—those descending from the millenarian sides of Enlightenment and liberal Christianity—were said to share a dangerous affinity. In the logic of the era's many admonitions tracing chiliastic ideologies to illusions of moral purity, the responsible citizen was one who humbly disclaimed any pretenses to freedom transcending sin. Across the fields of theology, political philosophy, mental hygiene, journalism, aesthetics, literature, and cinema, transactions between the discourses on American innocence had several effects on American society, but the dominant aim was to adjust historical expectations in accord with what I will call "theological countermodernism."

BY CONTRAST WITH its usage in literary and art history, *modernism* here designates an intellectual outgrowth of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism; it grew into a movement lasting from at least the 1870s to the

1930s and involved a cluster of ideas that called into question traditional distinctions between sacred and secular, the church and the world.⁷ This interpenetration of secular and sacred values firmed conservative Christian opposition to liberals, but liberals also disagreed with each other over the extent to which faith could assimilate with secular society before the churches became irrelevant. Certainly the differences between liberals and modernists were subtle to outsiders. In many ways, it was a family dispute.⁸ After all, each favored rationalism over supernaturalism, celebrated the humanity of Christ, considered proofs or confessions of personal conversion unnecessary, and supported a broad interdenominationalism united for good works; each believed there were multiple sources of moral authority, that moral perfectionism and postmillennialism were parts of the kerygma validated by the American experience, and that environment conditions the ways that men access truth in history. Following William R. Hutchison's *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, modernism is most sensitively defined as the name of an impetus within Protestant liberalism that became a self-conscious movement in the early twentieth century; it presumed the acceptance of biblical criticism but added that redemption should be achieved through correlating Christianity with the progressive elements in American society. Modernists did not define themselves as radicals, and some of their ablest defenders actually argued that they were in fact the conservers of Christianity. The University of Chicago's Shailer Matthews stated in *The Faith of Modernism* (1924) that the modernist stood for "permanent Christian convictions" because "Jesus Christ, the Savior, rather than dogma or even the Bible, is the center of the Modernist faith."⁹ Rehearsing an apologetic familiar since Friedrich Schleiermacher, Matthews tells his reader that what made Jesus exceptional was his unique consciousness of a dynamically active God (who evinces his creativity in the multitude of natural forms and unique human personalities), not miracles or physical resurrection (115).¹⁰ What makes this consciousness permanent, moreover, is not the identity of its origin, but its vitality and adaptability; the modernist's values, though permanently influenced by the consciousness of Jesus, continuously evolve to help men meet "the actual needs of our modern world" (15, 93). Modernist liberals believed they could discover in secular society's activism, literature, arts, and sciences sources to criticize traditions that conserved doctrines without advancing the spirit of the gospel. They were practicing prophecy in reverse of fundamentalism, reading Christian teachings in terms of progressive revelation rather than interpreting the present with reference to an ancient and predictive text.