

AMERICAN RELIGION and POLITICS

by Tarcisio Beal

One constant controversy in today's America revolves around the relationship between religion and politics. The two terms are used ambiguously and misleadingly in order to justify accusations of partisanship and the abridgment of religious freedom or the interference of religion in politics and vice-versa. The arguments

seldom deal with the social realities and the structures of power which perpetuate poverty, violation of basic human rights, and all kinds of injustices that betray the true ideals of a society worthy of its Christian name. Those who say they are apolitical—that religion and politics should stay apart—are denying the reality in which we live and argue about a religion that is anything but Christian. They confuse political action with narrow partisanship. They, contradicting the Gospels, speak of God's Reign solely as a reality of life after death, not of what Jesus said and exemplified.

First, let's be clear about one thing: any religion that claims to be politically neutral, which means not involved at all in social realities, does not exist. To say, for example, that Christianity was not at all involved in influencing both the true ideals and also the flaws and shortcomings of America is ignoring its history, as it happens now with the opponents of the "Critical Race Theory," who are afraid of the truth. It is only after acknowledging the good and the bad of our past that we will be able to shape a better future. In the following pages, we would like to outline some of the positive and some of the negative of American history in connection with Christianity. It is somewhat ironic that positive and truly Christian principles expressed and practiced by the Founding Fathers. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, are seldom mentioned. Their way of thinking was enhanced by 18th century "enlightened" British and French philosophers. The Enlightenment, not connected with or sanctioned by any church, but containing basic Christian principles, was a movement which sought to spread the truth and the facts of the past and the present so that people would learn how to improve themselves and society. Franklin and Jefferson dialogued with and even met several of the enlightened philosophers. What follows are examples of how Christian principles were used to condemn inhuman and

wicked actions and contemporary legislation and structures and, sometimes, also to justify the unjustifiable:

1. After the massacre of Pennsylvania's Conestoga Indians, carried out by Scot-Irish settlers in 1763, Benjamin Franklin commented: "Our frontier people call themselves Christians! They [the Conestogas] would have been safer if they had submitted to the Turks!"
2. In 1786, Thomas Jefferson, trusting that Americans would respect the human rights of the aborigines, said this: "It may be regarded as certain that not a foot of land will ever be taken from the Indians without their own consent. The sacredness of their rights is felt by all thinking persons in America as well as in Europe." Although, at first, he did not vote to abolish



Massacre of Pennsylvania's Conestoga Indians by Scot-Irish settlers in 1763—Indian Country Today

slavery, in 1799 he vehemently condemned it: "The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, of the most unrelenting despotism, in one part, and degrading submission, on the other."

3. In April 1838, George Washington, in a message to the Congress, called on the U. S. government to take the necessary measures to prevent the massacre of Indians who were fighting the take-over of their lands: "The frequent destruction of innocent women and children, who are chiefly the main victims of retaliation, must continue to shock humanity."
4. On April 23, 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a well-known defender of human rights, sent a letter to President Martin Van Buren, who was about to sign the order for the removal and take-over of the Cherokee lands in the South: "You, sir, will bring down that renowned chair in which you sit into infamy if your seal is set to this instrument of perfidy; and the name of this nation, hitherto the sweet omen of religion and liberty, will stink to the world."
5. The connection and justification of American's expansion westward, which killed millions of aborigines, was origi-

nally tied to the Puritan belief in the “Millennium”. In 1845, John O. Sullivan, editor of the New York Review, expressed the belief in America’s “Manifest Destiny,” that is, that God had blessed the expansion of the United States all the way to the Pacific Ocean. In the second half of the 19th century, especially during the Jacksonian Age, the same concept was used to justify slavery and the take-over the lands of the aborigines, especially of the Cherokees, and removed them westward to Oklahoma. Here’s what President Andrew Jackson told the Confederate Congress in 1867: “if the savage resists—civilization, with the ten Commandments in one hand and the sword in the other, demands its immediate extermination.”

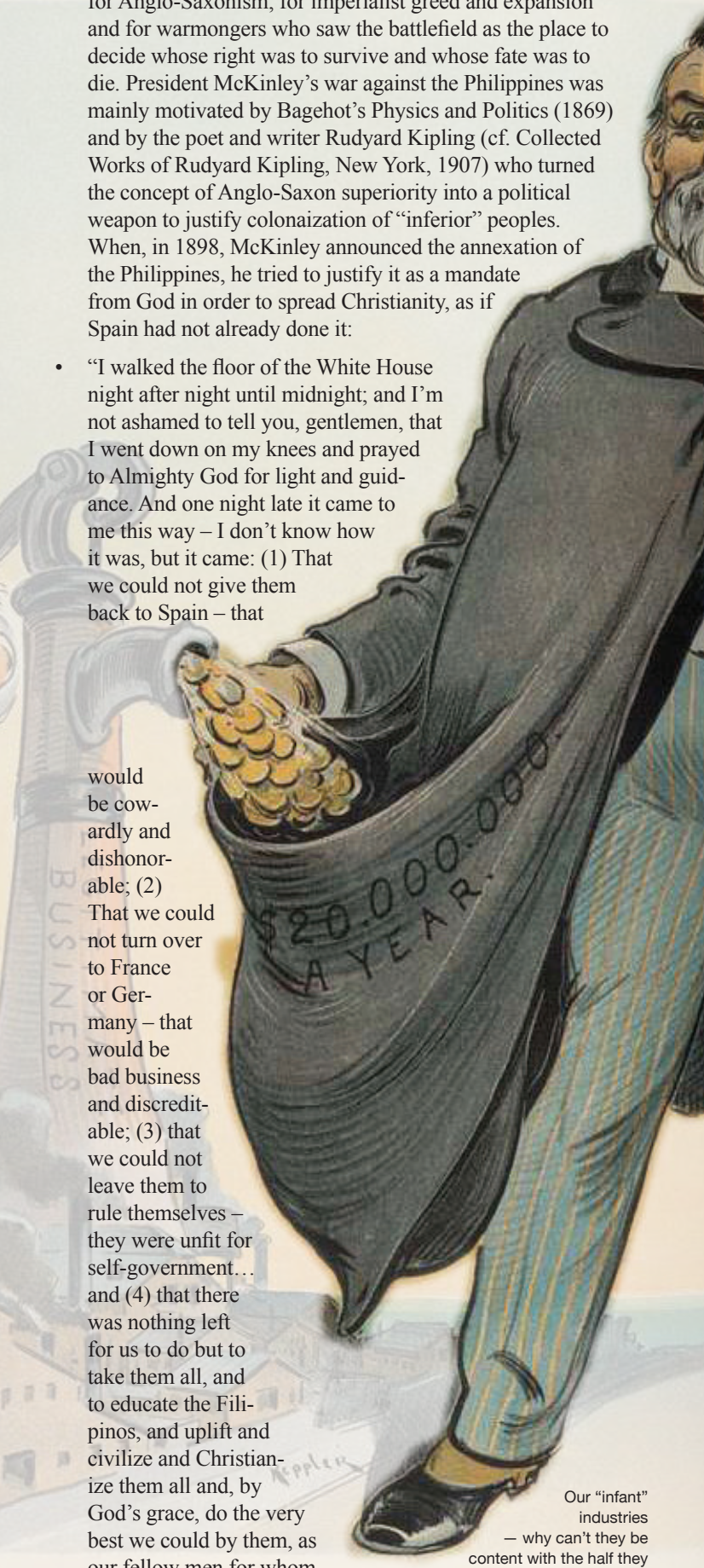
6. In 1867, Gen. John B. Sanborn, U. S. Secretary of the Interior, warned the nation about the ongoing extermination of the Indians, which was taking place in the West, especially in California under Governor George Stanford: “For a mighty nation like us to be carrying on a war against a few struggling nomads under such circumstances is a spectacle most humiliating and injustice unparalleled, a national crime most revolting, that must, sooner or later, bring down upon us or our posterity the judgement of Heaven.”
- Yes, early in American history, there were plenty of defenders of the human rights of the Indians (cf. the Proclamation of 1763, the Northwest Ordinance of July 13, 1787, and the Report of the Presidential Commission on Indian Affairs, 1869). Unfortunately, the U. S. Supreme Court (United States v. Lucero, 1869) shamed itself with the following comment: “The idea, that a handful of wild, half-naked, thieving, plundering, murdering savages should be dignified with the sovereign attributes of nations... is unsuited to the intelligence and justice of this age, or the natural rights of mankind.” Also, in January 1869, while the Western Army was carrying out the extermination of the Indians of the Plains, including by killing thousands of buffalos that were the natives’ main source of food. Gen. Philip Sheridan said to an Indian Chief who presented himself with the words, “Me, good Indian!”: “The only good Indians I ever saw were dead!”
- The sad history of slavery and the disrespect for the basic human and political rights of American blacks is now been widely exposed and is being finally confronted. Yet the spread of white supremacy shows that still growing and, especially within the Confederacy, the presence of the KKK and its destructive mentality are still quite strong in the United States. Few people, however, know that the KKK’s origin is tightly connected with the Southern Baptist preacher Thomas Dixon (1864-1946), author of *The Klansman* (1905) a glorification of the horrors of the KKK, which were, then, glorified in the 1915 movie “Birth of a Nation.”
- We should also note that the glorification of the Robber Barons and of uncontrolled capitalism greatly enhanced in late 19th century by Social Darwinism, a theory that contended that “survival of the fittest” was the supreme law of nature. Propagated by English philosophers like brothers, Julian and Aldous Huxley, by Walter Bagehot, and by Herbert Spencer who was immensely popular during the Gilded Age (1870s-1890s), Social Darwinism turned into a sort of godless, secular religion, providing a handy

justification for racial superiority complexes, especially for Anglo-Saxonism, for imperialist greed and expansion and for warmongers who saw the battlefield as the place to decide whose right was to survive and whose fate was to die. President McKinley’s war against the Philippines was mainly motivated by Bagehot’s *Physics and Politics* (1869) and by the poet and writer Rudyard Kipling (cf. *Collected Works of Rudyard Kipling*, New York, 1907) who turned the concept of Anglo-Saxon superiority into a political weapon to justify colonization of “inferior” peoples. When, in 1898, McKinley announced the annexation of the Philippines, he tried to justify it as a mandate from God in order to spread Christianity, as if Spain had not already done it:

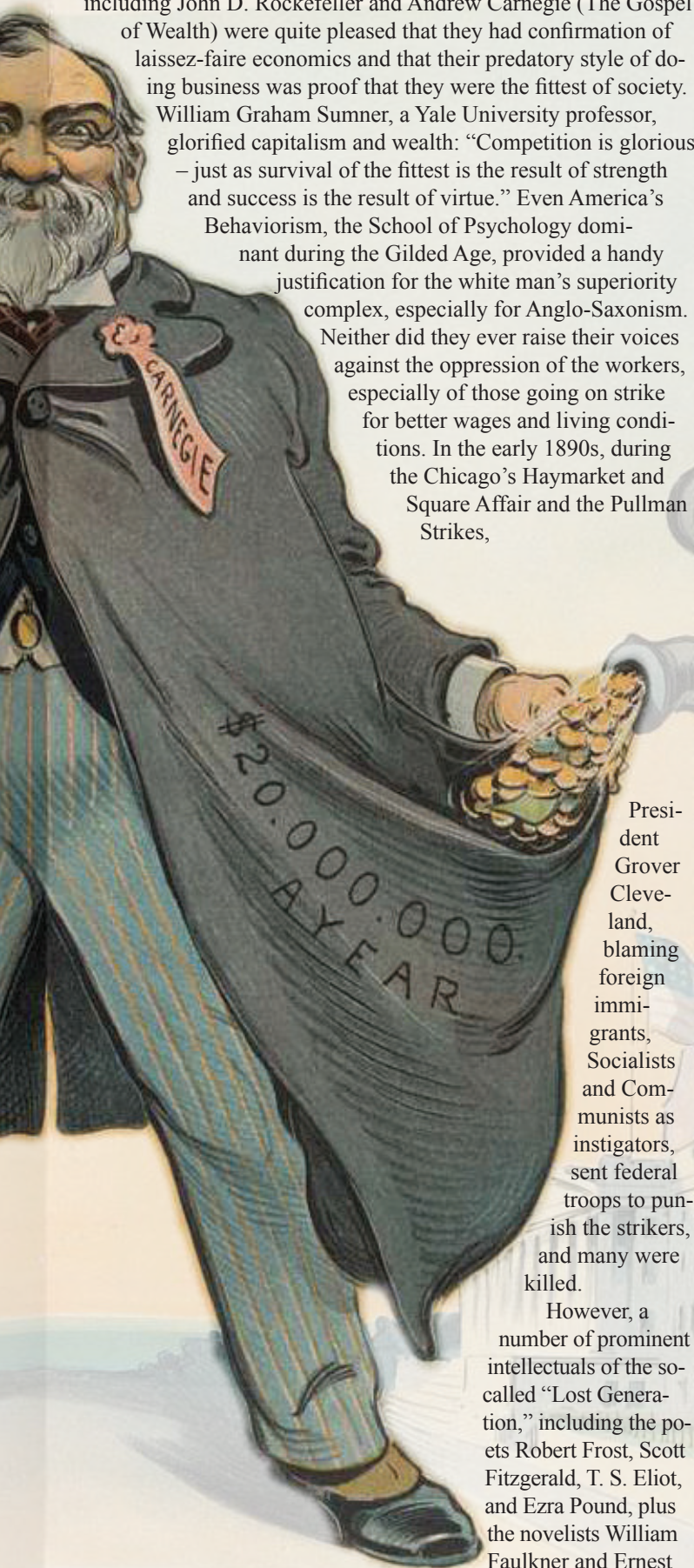
- “I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I’m not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed to Almighty God for light and guidance. And one night late it came to me this way – I don’t know how it was, but it came: (1) That we could not give them back to Spain – that

would be cowardly and dishonorable; (2) That we could not turn over to France or Germany – that would be bad business and discreditable; (3) that we could not leave them to rule themselves – they were unfit for self-government... and (4) that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them all and, by God’s grace, do the very best we could by them, as our fellow men for whom Christ also died.”

Our “infant” industries — why can’t they be content with the half they make honestly? — Library of Congress



Wow! Talk about a superiority complex! The Robber Barons, including John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie (The Gospel of Wealth) were quite pleased that they had confirmation of laissez-faire economics and that their predatory style of doing business was proof that they were the fittest of society. William Graham Sumner, a Yale University professor, glorified capitalism and wealth: "Competition is glorious – just as survival of the fittest is the result of strength and success is the result of virtue." Even America's Behaviorism, the School of Psychology dominant during the Gilded Age, provided a handy justification for the white man's superiority complex, especially for Anglo-Saxonism. Neither did they ever raise their voices against the oppression of the workers, especially of those going on strike for better wages and living conditions. In the early 1890s, during the Chicago's Haymarket and Square Affair and the Pullman Strikes,



President Grover Cleveland, blaming foreign immigrants, Socialists and Communists as instigators, sent federal troops to punish the strikers, and many were killed.

However, a number of prominent intellectuals of the so-called "Lost Generation," including the poets Robert Frost, Scott Fitzgerald, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, plus the novelists William Faulkner and Ernest

mindset by presenting the central characters of their novels (the old black maid Dilsey in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and the Cuban fisherman, Santiago, in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*), as life-size heroes.

Furthermore, despite a misinterpretation of Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution by Herbert Spencer and the glorifiers of capitalism and by those Christians who read the Bible literally, the Gilded Age also witnessed the rise of a good number of Christians committed to social reform. They even called for a form of Christian Socialism and established organizations and structures to care for the victims of a socio-political system controlled by the wealthiest 10% of the population. Among those who suffered the worst forms of poverty and helplessness were middle and lower-class women. One of the main causes wrecking families was drunkenness, which worsened poverty, unemployment, and labor conditions. From 1879 to 1898, the Women's Christian Temperance Movement was led by the efforts of Frances Willard who, in 1887, also joined the Knights of Labor, a union viewed as an enemy of capitalism. Jane Addams founded the Hull House of Chicago, in 1889, to provide help for big-city working-class families. Also in 1889, Vida Scudder, Professor of Literature at Wellesley College, and six graduates of Smith College formed an organization of college women to work in settlement houses like Denison House, in Boston, to take care of the needy, especially of new immigrants. Scudder often spoke of these women as imitators of the early Christians who dedicated their lives to loving service of the needy.

By the 1890s, a number of Protestant ministers were preaching and living a form of Social Gospel. Congregational minister Washington Gladden advocated collective bargaining and profit sharing. Charles Sheldon (*In His Steps*, 1897) wanted a society built according to the ultimate question: "What would Jesus do?" Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist Professor at the Rochester Theological Seminary, was a strong critic of the dominant socio-political system. His *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907) dared to condemn the idolatry of the marketplace and defended a Christian form of Socialism:

- "Our scientific political economy has long been an oracle of the false god. It has taught us to approach economic questions from the point of view of the goods and not of man. Theology must become Christocentric; political economy must become anthropocentric. Man is Christianized when he puts God before self; political economy will be Christianized when it puts man before wealth. Socialistic political economy does that. It is materialistic in its theory of human life and history, but it is humane in its aims, and to that extent it is closer to Christianity than the orthodox science has been."
- Catholicism was a minority religion in the USA until early 20th century, then the surge
- of Italians and Central European immigrants from the 1870s to the 1920s, and of Mexican braceros and other Latinos since the 1960s, made it the largest American denomination. But while most Catholics were widely discriminated and struggling economically, the hierarchs of the Church, at least from the 1990s to the 1960s, notably the Cardinals of the big cities like Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Baltimore, lived in luxury, worshipping the "gospel of success." Historians call them rulers of the "Brick & Mortar Church,"

Hemingway, left the country in disgust. Faulkner and Hemingway contradicted the prevailing social Darwinist and white supremacy

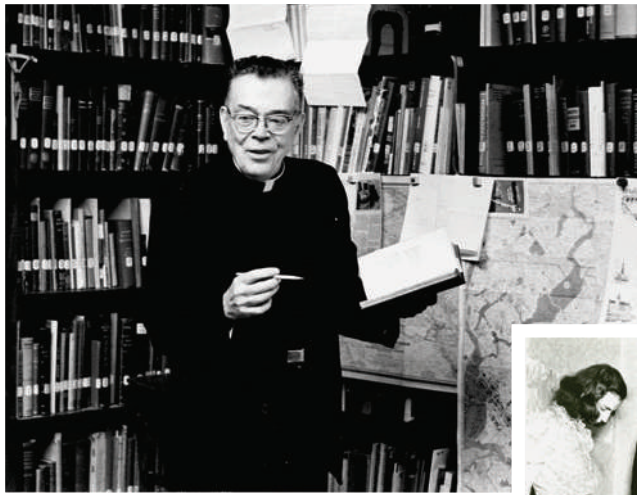
as they loudly displayed their power and the greatness of their dioceses: “Chicago will contact Detroit!” – “New York will be in touch with Baltimore!” Neither did they ever raise their voices against the oppression of the workers, especially of those going on strike for better wages and living conditions.

However, despite the sell-out of the “Brick and Mortar Church’s” worship of the “gospel of success,” there appeared a number of Catholics who became strong critics of a bourgeois life style that contradicted the Gospels. Among them was Paul Furfey. A native of Cambridge, MA. and a socially-conscious priest, Furfey earned his Doctorate in Sociology from the Catholic University of America in 1926. He insisted on a reform of American society based on the Gospels, not on human wisdom; for him, caution and moderation are the bourgeois principles and the pursuit of success and money are not the Christian way:

Furfey became an active member of the Catholic Worker Movement started in 1911 by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in 1911. Day, a Catholic convert, was a fearless woman who

stood up to the males, including Catholic bishops whose behavior she deemed contrary to the example of Jesus. In 1932, she was thrown into jail for participating in the Washington Hunger March. She was a champion of the poor, a pacifist who lived a simple life in imitation of Jesus, fighting for solutions to the wretchedness of the victims of the system, and even fighting for the creation of farm communities. Her 1976 “Letter to America,” published in the National Catholic Reporter, had only one powerful word: “REPENT!” Today, given the lack of prophetic stance by the vast majority of the Catholic bishops, there is no surprise that they have not called for the beatification of Dorothy Day.

Our socio-economic conditions need, more than ever, courageous voices who will call all Americans to live up to the best of the ideals of the past and the present in order to build a future that justifies calling our society “Christian” and the “Hope of the World.”



Paul Hanly Furfey Papers, American Catholic History Research Center & University Archives. (ca 1960s)



First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt with Rev. Furfey and others at Fides House, Washington, D.C., May 30, 1941. American Catholic History Research Center & University Archives.

BIO: *Tarcisio Beal is professor Emeritus of History at the University of the Incarnate Word. [Note: Sources used for this article can be obtained from lavoz@esperanzacenter.org]*

VOTE, Texas!

May 7, 2022

Local Elections & Special Constitutional Amendment Election

Monday, April 25th - First day of Early Voting

Tuesday, April 26th - Last day to apply for a ballot by mail (received, not postmarked)

Tuesday, May 3rd - Last day of Early Voting

Saturday, May 7th - Election Day

May 24, 2022

Texas Primary Runoff Election

Monday, April 25th - Last day to register to vote

Friday, May 13th - Last day to apply for a ballot by mail (received, not postmarked)

Monday, May 16th - First day of Early Voting

Friday, May 20th - Last day of Early Voting

Tuesday, May 24th - Election Day

For more information and resources for voting in Texas, please visit VoteTexas.gov.

The nonpartisan League of Women Voters of Texas Voters Guide is available at VOTE411.org or as a printable pdf of the Constitutional Amendment Voters Guide English or Spanish

* Amendments proposed relate to property taxes