

# The American Culture of Despair



# The American Culture of Despair:

*The Sacred, Secularity,  
and the Test of Time*

By

Richard K. Fenn

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**For Juliana,**  
*Love incarnate*



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# FOREWORD

## IMAGINING THE SACRED

### 1. Critical moments

As a modern and largely secular society, America is not as disenchanting as many sociologists have assumed. It is not the sacred that is absent; its presence is manifested or experienced as an absence: as something missing, a lost promise, a critical moment not fully seized, an obligatory or inspiring but now irretrievable vision from the past. It is not that time has left the sacred behind in some antiquarian preserve but that the sacred is known more often by a sense of missed possibility and thus by the apprehension of being continually too late: more under the form of absence than in a real, immediate, and potent presence.

Without the sanctification of time, it is very difficult to construe critical moments—ruptures in time—as elements of a story with continuity and development, a beginning and an end. That is why, in a radically secularized society, critical moments represent a sharp break between the past and what could have been the future. They are ends without the possibility of being transformed into new beginnings—more like the Cuban Missile Crisis than the winter solstice. In traditional societies that sanctify the long passage of time itself it is possible to believe that the time will come when a society can finally fulfill its promises, pay off old debts, and overcome erosion and decay. It will never be too late for a medieval Caliphate or an evangelical and Christian nation. Thus Hitler saw his *Kommand* as part of a centuries-long battle. However, when time itself is not sanctified, there is no certain prospect either of continuity or of further development. The critical moment, even when it is held in sacred memory, leaves a legacy of continually felt absence, of ongoing, perhaps endless struggle without the prospect of ultimate consummation. Thus, a new American dictator may well find glory only in struggle itself from one critical moment to the next: perpetual crisis and self-inflicted wounds rather than sacrifice within the framework of sacred history.

I argue that a radically secularized society sanctifies time in critical moments rather than throughout a sacred history. Thus, in the nineteenth century, the end of Lincoln's life could still be transformed into a new beginning: a new birth and extension of the nation's sovereignty. Public portraiture depicted President Washington extending his arms to the fallen Lincoln from his apotheosis in heaven, depicted in the fresco above the rotunda in the nation's Capitol. Time was still infused with eternity. Was there a sanctified sense of an ongoing history in which ends could be transformed into beginnings and current sacrifices be redeemed in the end?

In the more secularized society of the 1960s, I argue, the present time could be regarded as critical, even fateful for the future of the nation. There was little sense that ends could be transformed into beginnings, that in time all sacrifices would be redeemed, and that the original vision of the nation's mission in history could still be consummated by a nation inspired and guided by the spirit of those present at the beginning of the Republic. The sacred torch of liberty might be passed to a new generation, to be sure, and a new frontier was opening up. The time had come for the president to say "Let us begin," but the journey that would take much longer to complete than the lifetimes of those present. Thus, by the 1960s, American society had become more secularized: more clearly subject to the passage of time without the prospect of redemption.

Without recourse to the guarantees of a sacred history, President Kennedy endowed his administration with the sanctity of the critical moment. In the first days of his new administration, President Kennedy assured the nation that in "this hour" Americans faced unparalleled opportunity but also peril. In his State of the Union address, Kennedy proclaimed: "Our problems are critical. The tide is unfavorable. The news will be worse before it is better. And while hoping and working for the best, we should prepare ourselves now for the worst." The collective and the existential, politics and life merged in this very hour. The critical moment itself had all the earmarks of the sacred, but the passage of time was not sacred and offered no antidotes to cultural despair.

Furthermore, the death of Kennedy brought the nation even closer to the recognition its vulnerability to time and to chance, and what had been the nation's future would remain, for many, a permanently missed possibility. Observances of Kennedy's memory became signs more of his absence than of his continuing presence in the imagination or ideology of the American people. The critical moment of Kennedy's assassination has remained embedded in the event itself: perennially superseded but not

transformed by the passage of time. What is to prevent the increase of cultural despair?

Critical moments give the collective state of the nation existential impact and significance. That is why they attain the seriousness of the sacred. Not only the continuity but also the survival of the social system is at stake. To grasp this we need Giorgio Agamben's discussion of a "state of exception," the world of serious "indistinction" between life and politics; "When life and politics . . . begin to become one, all life becomes sacred and all politics becomes the exception."<sup>1</sup> I will use the term to apply to any critical moment in a social system where the relation between ends and means is being created by the *ad hoc* actions of the chief executive.

For instance, Arthur Schlesinger called the Cuban Missile Crisis "the most dangerous moment in human history."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the nation's fate, and perhaps that of the planet, was indeed terrifyingly contingent on chance, circumstance, and on the often-flawed judgment of its leaders. Although the crisis had lasted for thirteen days, Schlesinger called it a night, just as Kennedy had spoken of the times as "this hour." Indeed, it was not only the political elite that knew that the moment was critical for the nation. The American people—and the peoples of other nations—knew that any military engagement could subject them to what had come to be called a nuclear winter; thus, the politics of the Cold War had become existential. The Cuban Missile Crisis was like the winter solstice, the longest night of the year: a time when the survival of the planet was hanging in the balance of the moment. Thus, the exercise of sovereignty made and signified a difference that transcended all other differences: those between the personal and the societal, the collective and the existential, as well as those between the past, present, and the future. No wonder that such a critical moment – and with it the unfettered exercise of sovereignty itself - became sanctified.

Without the sanctification of time, however, JFK's assassination led many Americans to believe that the nation had experienced an irreversible rupture in its history: a point of no return. There was a fatal flaw in the nation: destructive forces that were erupting on the streets or on the nation's campuses. Despair increased as body bags kept returning from Vietnam. The times were confused, out of joint, deeply troubled, and on occasion close to the brink of chaos. The public came to realize that the truth was being withheld from the American people, and that their leaders knew neither how to resolve the war nor how to solve the nation's

complex social and economic problems. There was an increasing demand for an authority that could act decisively and significantly, transform means into ends and ends into new beginnings. Nixon promised that he had “a plan” to end the war in Vietnam, just as Trump said he would “fix it....Trust me.”

The radical secularization of the process of time leaves a nation with a heightened sense of both personal and collective mortality; it becomes increasingly vulnerable to cultural despair. A regressive cycle begins. However, being forced to live with a chronic sense of contingency and chance, of absence and decline intensifies the need for the sacred at the very political and cultural centers of modern societies. Thus, the regressive cycle inevitably leads back to a longing for a Caesar.

Because secular societies have no way to transcend the passage of time, they sanctify the critical moment itself: Kennedy’s “this hour” and Schlesinger’s reduction of the thirteen-day Cuban Missile Crisis to that “night.” Such a critical moment blurs the distinctions between the existential and the political, between the personal and the collective, and between matters of life and matters of death. However, without the myth of a sacred history, or the capacity to sense the eternal within the times, a radically secular society is left only with a sense of its existence as subject to the passage of time. Thus, when confronted by the finality of a sudden loss, like the death of Kennedy, a radically secular society can only sanctify the critical moment as separating what used to be the past from what used to be the future. Time is no longer sufficiently sacred to be redemptive. The way forward leads back to the critical moment marked by the transformative and salvific exercise of sovereignty itself, when means became ends in themselves and ends became new beginnings.

## 2. The sanctification of the critical moment

In a society where the living remain in some sort of conversation with the dead, sanctifying the passage of time prevents the critical moment of departure and loss from becoming irredeemable; it postpones the finality of death. Consider this ancient Greek monument erected by a father to his dead son, described by the historian of ancient Greece, Jean-Pierre Vernant: “A stela at Athens that crowns the tomb of a young man recommends that the passerby weep that so beautiful a boy had died, *‘hos kalos on ethane.’*”<sup>3</sup> We are struck immediately by the way this message confronts us with the contrast between what had been before—the boy and his beauty—and what had come after he had died. There is no other

solvent here for the loss of the dead boy than the tears of the living over the course of time. Indeed, it takes time for the psyche to sanctify the critical moment with devotion and weeping; otherwise, it becomes too late to prevent immediate presence from becoming chronic absence and irreparable loss. The passage of time, sanctified by memory and anticipation, perpetuates the tension between absence and presence, death and life, fascination and terror. Thus, the standing stones of a Neolithic community point precisely toward the place where the sun disappeared on the night of the winter solstice; an ancient Greek stela – a grave monument - calls on passers-by to commemorate with their tears a dead boy, his beauty, and his untimely death. Sacred monuments allow losses to be redeemed by the passage of time; they give space to the time when the perennially absent will return.

However, even sacred times and places, people and objects, slowly lose their sanctity. The passage of time erodes every sacred connection with the sources of life itself. It is this process that I will be calling “the cultural fatigue of the sacred.” I argue that the fatigue of the sacred, combined with the radical secularization of social life, leads to cultural despair: the awareness that a time is coming when it may well be too late for a society to redeem its promises or to forestall disaster. Not even the burning of sacred torches on the longest night of the year may be enough to bring the dawn. Despair feeds the longing for a sovereign who can seize the critical moment, whose word is final, whose means are ends in themselves, and whose office thus has no term-limits.

Does cultural despair always perpetuate the regressive cycle leading back to authoritarian forms of sovereignty? To approach this question we need to understand how a particular society constructs, interprets, manages, and distributes the flow of time. Emile Durkheim saw social systems as being interruptions of the flow of time, like boulders in the middle of a stream. Thus, in archaic and traditional societies we will be focusing on caves, stone circles, standing stones, temples, rites, masks, and monuments. In modern societies, we may focus on strategies for finding or revising precedents, updating old promises and renegotiating old debts. We might also explore the ways in which a complex, modern society turns prophecies into predictions, and predictions into a wide range of more or less implausible scenarios as a basis for risk management.

We also need to see how societies give at least the illusion of continuity to critical moments of apparently irreversible finality. How does any society lend ancient precedent to historical novelty? How, on the eve

of a civil war or in the aftermath of the assassination of a president, does a particular society transform a sharp break in time into a continuing story or irreparable loss into the possibility of redemption?

Thus, to understand social life we need to examine the various strategies, some of them self-confident and innovative, pragmatic and flexible, others of them more desperate, by which a particular society has tried to prevent itself from being washed away by the passage of time. How did Americans, after a civil war that had turned into a revolution, become the first new nation, a *novum ordo saeculorum*, even with a Constitution giving its president powers on par with those of the King of England? After the death of President Lincoln, did American society believe that its very being-in-time had been transformed by the civil war or by the assassination of its President? By the sanctification of collective memory, has American society been able to become coeval with—and thus honor—the dead and to redeem the sacrifices of its patriots and martyrs.

### 3. The sanctification of time

Without the sanctification of time, a secular society is unable to prevent the loss of the departed friend or child, citizen or martyr, sovereign or scion from producing a finality that is irreversible and irredeemable. However, even an intimate link between the living and the dead, the past and the present, time will wash away the remains of the departed and will slowly erode. Thus the fatigue of the sacred eventually undermines even the more enduring bastions erected by the social order against the flow of time. Under these conditions, a society doubts its capacity to revitalize itself in the name of its original virtues or to mobilize its citizens for further sacrifice. Cultural despair indeed prevents a society from inspiring the living to finish the work of past generations.

Were it not for the secularization of time and the fatigue of the sacred, the assassination of JFK may not have fed a national culture of despair. Indeed, the many decennial commemorations of JFK's assassination may have prolonged a poignant sense of Kennedy's absence and of the future that with his assassination had been aborted. That is why, I will argue, there is a profound American longing for a charismatic sovereign who is more than a match for the nation's enemies and who embodies as well as announces the nation's future.



Such a sovereign would be what Vernant calls the colossus: a double who can enable a people to achieve a sense of its own continuity throughout time and its own grounding in a world far beyond their knowledge and control. "By embedding the stone in the ground, one attempts to fix, immobilize, localize in definite spot of the earth the elusive *psuche*, which is at once everywhere and nowhere."<sup>5</sup> Thus, the sacred prevents the critical moment from becoming a point of no return. As the psychoanalyst Irvine Schiffer puts it, "fate becomes transformed into an old prototypical object—the benevolent parent internalized in childhood and projected outwardly in time of crisis."<sup>6</sup> Thus, a charismatic leader who promises to "Fix it" becomes an autocrat whose word is law, whose means are ends in themselves, and who acknowledges no limits on his sovereignty: a colossus.

Vernant is quick to point out, however, that the colossos, whether in the form of a stela or any other double, eventually loses its power to hold together in one time and place the opposites of life and death, presence and absence, mobility and fixity, symbol and actuality. Indeed, Vernant says, "It was not long before the Greeks forgot the funerary stone's relationship with the dead, remaining conscious only of its visible form."<sup>7</sup> Even the colossus is subject to the tendency of the sacred to become fatigued in its struggle to transcend with the passage of time. As Busby writes, "What makes the materialization of divine power particularly interesting . . . is the perception that after a certain time this power begins to run out, that it needs to be regularly renewed."<sup>8</sup>

As it becomes fatigued, the sacred intensifies and prolongs the experience of separation and loss as well as the dread of a future point of no return. As cultural fatigue weakens the sacred's capacity to protract presence in the face of absence, the sacred is progressively less able to project possibility in the face of finality. Speaking of the ancient Greek use of statues as doubles for the departed, Jean-Pierre Vernant notes that the double is a peculiar and ambiguous presence that is also the sign of an absence."<sup>9</sup> However, "The sole effect of all these doubles," he writes, is to make "absence all the more poignant and unbearable."<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the ancient Greek stela created a palpable sense of a *difference that should transcend and outlive all other differences*: not only those separating the living from the dead and the present from the absent but the differences between the past, the present, and the future. No wonder the passerby was enjoined to weep. By sanctifying the memory of the boy and by intensifying the passer's-by own sense of his loss, the sacred somehow

extends the time span of the critical moment of the boy's departure and, in doing so, endows the boy's absence with the aura of his presence. "It is on the monument that this youthful beauty, preserved by death before it could fade, could continue to be seen throughout the succession of the ages."<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the task of the sacred is to perpetuate the critical moment, to create an in-between time in which it is still possible to postpone the finality of absence and loss, and to immunize a people against cultural despair. However, by protracting and re-presenting the critical moment between life and death, the sacred not only resists the finality of death with the recognition of a soul's enduring presence but also intensifies the anguish of absence. Thus, on the one hand, through sacred memory, what the Greeks called *anamnesis*, there is some semblance of continuity between the past and the present. On the other hand, however, the enormity of such a boy's death continues over time to evoke tears of sorrow. The sacred is no antidote to—and may thus be conducive to—despair.

By sustaining a sense of the past as present, the sacred also heightens the experience of absence and loss. Consider an engraving, published in 1802 shortly after the death of George Washington, which portrayed the president being attended at the moment of final departure by his physicians. On the one hand, the engraving's depiction of Washington's apotheosis into the heavens converts the end of his life and of his presence on earth into a new beginning among the immortals. Indeed, the past and the present continue to be intertwined with each other, and the critical moment itself is caught up in some sort of eternity. On the other hand, however, sacred memory also bears the scars of the passage of time. An inscription at the base of the engraving reads: "Americans, behold & shed a grateful tear/for a man who has gained yor freedom most dear/And now is departing unto the realms above/Where he may ever rest in lasting peace & love." Like the beautiful dead boy commemorated on the Greek stela, the engraving of George Washington's death and departure thus intends to evoke tears of saddened memory, tears that not only rekindle a sense of the presence of the departed but also perpetuate the recognition of his absence.

In 1802, there was still time for the sacred to transcend the differences created by the passage of time: notably those between time and eternity, the living and the dead, the before and the after, the end and the beginning. However, the engraving sanctifies the memory of one who not only continued to be present but who also remained profoundly missed. Early in the nineteenth century the engraving of George Washington's apotheosis

at the moment of his death could still point to “the realms above,” where the occasions of life know no particular season.<sup>12</sup> Similarly revered was Gilbert Stuart’s portrait of Washington. Indeed, “As Washington was apotheosized in the minds and hearts of his countrymen, so was the *Athenaeum* portrait. During his three-year tour of the United States in 1811, a decade after Washington’s death, the Russian diplomat Pavel Petrovich Svinin penned words that underscore the link between the veneration of the man and the posthumous cult status of Stuart’s *Athenaeum*: “The country is glutted with bust portraits of Washington from the brush of this master [Stuart]. It is noteworthy that every American considers it his sacred duty to have a likeness of Washington in his home, just as we have images of God’s saints.”<sup>13</sup>

Whether it is in withstanding the passage of time, meeting the test of time, expunging the taint of time, or surviving the shock of finality—of sudden and irreversible absence—the sacred itself is vulnerable to the passage of time and may become less an embodiment of the eternal than a mere copy. Indeed, the sacred may lose its ability to annul or obscure the difference between life and death, the natural and the supernatural; presence and absence may lose their mystery and become relatively matters of fact. In time, the possibility of real presence yields to the awareness of chronic and unredeemable loss and absence.

As the fatigue of the sacred becomes manifest, and as cultural despair inhibits sacrifice, the longing intensifies for a Caesar who may mix life with politics and transcend not only the difference between words and deeds, ends and means, but also between human and divine law.

#### **4. The death of Kennedy**

You might well disagree. You might think that it is not the absence of a leader like Kennedy but lingering apprehensions of his presence that feed the longing for a new Caesar. You might well believe that American society, however secularized it may be, is not a wholly disenchanted universe but is still haunted by a sense of its own greatness. You might even sense that time itself has not been wholly secularized but rather that critical moments, partially sanctified, have a life of their own and come back with renewed force in times of crisis. Thus, Americans may well long for a leader like the Kennedy who saw us through the Cuban Missile Crisis, whose spirit still evokes a destiny of national greatness, and who asks us to sacrifice even our lives for the liberty of the nations of the world.

You might even imagine that there is an inherent poetry in the American soul, despite its apparent popular addiction to information processing and technology. Speaking of Greek tragedy, Rene Girard points out that “The god bestows his presence on the poet only, it seems, to withdraw it. A thin thread of remembrance links these alternating visitations and absences, a thread just long enough to assure the individual’s sense of continuity and to sustain those visions of the past that heighten the intoxication of possession but render even more painful the anguish of loss.”<sup>14</sup> Is there, then, a “thin thread of remembrance” linking current losses and despair to the nation’s mood at the moment of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy?

Under these conditions the sacred points beyond itself to something or someone – or somewhere - else, or to someone who once was loved and who remains only as one profoundly missed. American society remains in a sort of purgatorial limbo: unsure of what has been lost forever in the death of John F. Kennedy and in a state of continuing self-appraisal and self-judgment not only about the causes of his assassination but about the soul of the nation itself.

Certainly I do not intend to underestimate the psyche’s need to believe that nothing of the past is lost and gone forever or beyond the reach of the psyche’s effort to recover its own vital presence by incorporating the past into the present or projecting it into the future. I take seriously the capacity of the psyche to transform itself by creating objects or symbols that anchor and ground the psyche in external reality and bring both the past and the future to bear upon the present. To put it another way, the psyche itself has a way of overcoming the dread of nonbeing and the trauma of separation and loss by transforming the present into a critical moment. Thus, sanctified, the critical moment gives the psyche time for that transcendence by opposing possibility to finality, hope to terror, life to death, and presence to absence.

On the other hand, you might be sure that neither the nation’s annual but increasingly moribund Memorial Day rites, nor the repeated representations and commemorations of the death of Kennedy through the nation’s media over the subsequent fifty years, have been able to restore what was left of the capacity of the nation to embody and exemplify the sacred at its political and cultural center. On the contrary, you might argue that, in the wake of Kennedy’s assassination, the vacuum of sanctity at the political and cultural center left the sacred free to seek sanctuary in the domestic, the mundane, and the private. After all, have not migrant

workers on the West Coast sanctified their opposition to their employers by invoking the Virgin of Guadalupe? Has not the sacred taken on more domestic but also more local, private, and transitory forms: private visions and revelations? Certainly, the Supreme Court of the United States has relegated the definition of pornography to local option and sanctified the conscientious objection even of individuals who lack membership in a traditionally religious community. Some even argue that nothing matters now more than the sanctity of the fetus or of the conscience of the truly Christian believer.

Under these latter conditions, longings for control and recognition, for healing and affection, for certainty and security come into conflict with the prevailing distribution of advantage and satisfaction. Eventually, pundits will exhaust their repertoire of clichés for naming the American malaise as nativism, xenophobia, *ressentiment* or moral outrage, authoritarianism, and chauvinism. It becomes increasingly evident that the nation is in a new situation that is yet to be adequately defined.

At the same time, the fatigue of the sacred becomes more palpable as inspired memory no longer re-presents or reenacts the past but offers only a recollection or recounting of what has gone before. Recollection in turn yields to mere repetition, especially in the form of rites that have to be repeated if their benefits are not to erode with the passage of time. Under these conditions, the cultural fatigue of the sacred may turn into a more widespread and debilitating form of cultural despair, and it is under these conditions, I suggest, that a people demands a sovereign capable of initiating a Final Solution.

At such a stage, unresolved moral issues and popular distrust of any official or leader calling for further sacrifice will intensify cultural despair and may eventuate in demands for a final solution, even for an apocalyptic showdown. On that day, old promises have to be kept, old debts paid, former obligations fulfilled, ancient grievances assuaged.

## 5. The ancient in the modern

The sacred, I will suggest, enacts and enables the individual to transcend the critical moment by signifying the crucial passage from one state into another. Thus, cairns and water-tombs situated on hilltops between valleys or along waterways where the passage becomes narrower and thus more critical are cases in point, as I have suggested. So also is the possibility that rites seek to enable individuals to transcend the mundane

awareness of difference and thus to reach a state of mind transcending all difference.

The sacred therefore seeks to become the difference that supersedes all other differences. To do so, of course, it must help the devotee and practitioner to escape from the mundane by transcending the differences between space and time, the natural and the supernatural, or between life and death. To this end, Neolithic peoples may have made use of substances that induced altered states of consciousness. "It is possible to extend this argument even further and relate it to suggestions that these sites were involved in practices to do with altered states of consciousness and trance. There is evidence to suggest that certain types of chambered tombs may have been suitable venues for these kinds of activities, and this interpretation has some heritage in Neolithic studies. . . . In many cases, rites of passage are accompanied by trance, disorientation, and bewildering episodes. Furthermore, if people were in trance-like states, perhaps induced by dancing, music, fasting, or hallucinogens, stone may actually have taken on fluid properties."<sup>15</sup>

Such monuments as cairns and tombs, like the rites altering states of consciousness, both mark and soften the impact of the critical moment in which presence becomes absence, life becomes death, and whatever came before is superseded by what is coming afterward.

The sacred indeed marks such a critical moment in societies separated by centuries of social change. Thus anthropologists have long been interested in the moments that obscure the differences between the living and the dead, the present and the absent, and the temporal from the eternal. Malinowski, for instance, focused on the uncertainty of a widow as to whether her husband was still alive, still present; for that crucial moment in time, the widow was torn between attraction to his presence and abhorrence at his absence. The life that was there is gone and will not return except during the exact, proper, and skillful performance of a rite. For another instance, the anthropologist Jonathan Z. Smith has focused on the critical moment in which the hunter waits to discover whether his quarry is truly dead or still alive enough to be dangerous. Is the moment in which the arrow of time is shot part of time that is moving irreversibly in one direction? Is its passage never to be rescinded?<sup>17</sup> Note, however, that in such a critical moment it is not clear whether the slain animal is dead or alive, present or absent; the hunters pause in some apprehension before standing on their prey and uttering shouts of triumph. It takes a moment to experience the shock of the rupture between before and after, presence and

absence, the relentless and irreversible aspects of time itself. Thus sacred rites and practices, beliefs and symbols that capture, re--present, and enable people to cope with such moments over longer periods of time.

We need not be surprised by the affinities among the archaic, the primitive, the traditional and antique, and the modern. As Dorothy Ross puts it, "in the federal [period] the antique was familiar."<sup>18</sup> Thus, the same Mercury who appears in early depictions of George Washington ascending into heaven can also be found on the ruined floors of Celtic chapels in Britain.<sup>19</sup> Thus, in modern societies as well as in the archaic or traditional, the sacred transforms an end into a new beginning, an absence into an enduring presence, mortality into life, and the temporal into the everlasting.

However, the sacred has never been a wholly reliable ally in the struggle against the passage of time. Both in ancient as well as in modern societies, the sacred may lose its ability to obscure the difference between life and death, the natural and the supernatural, presence and absence. Even in Neolithic societies or in archaic Greece, on its battlefields or in the Athenian Temple, secularity infects and corrupts the sacred. A few months after the sun survives the winter solstice it begins its long decline. The standing stone signifies the absence as well as the once and future presence of the one who put it there or in whose memory it was erected. The solidity of rocks and of calcified bones is always in tension with the power of water to erode rocks and to wash human remains into the sea.<sup>20</sup> The sacrifice offered to the gods may be accepted, but it may also be ignored or declined. The statue of the deity in the Acropolis is a certified copy of the real thing. Constantly engaged in a struggle to meet the test of time, therefore, the sacred becomes subject to chronic fatigue. I will therefore be asking the reader to suspend for the time being any firm convictions about the differences between modernity and antiquity.

Among artists, of course, the confluence of the archaic and the modern has long been familiar. For instance, Picasso once told a reporter for *The Guardian* about his experience searching for African art at an ethnological museum in Paris. "A smell of mould and neglect caught me by the throat. I was so depressed that I would have chosen to leave immediately. . . . But I forced myself to stay, to examine these masks, all these objects that people had created with a sacred, magical purpose, to serve as intermediaries between them and the unknown, hostile forces surrounding them, attempting in that way to overcome their fears by giving them colour and form. And then I understood what painting really meant. It's not an

aesthetic process; it's a form of magic that interposes itself between us and the hostile universe, a means of seizing power by imposing a form on our terrors as well as on our desires. The day I understood that, I had found my path." <sup>21</sup> Painting, like the mask, functions as a double, a standing stone shielding us from terror and grounding us in the universe.

Indeed, the power of art and of the sacred is not only liberating but also terrifying. According to the curator of a Parisian exhibit of Picasso in 2006, "Picasso created something so ugly that it startled people, frightened them. . . . He got that from African art—it was a different way of looking at the power of art, and that set his art free." <sup>22</sup> Thus, like the sacred, these masks transcended such usual differences as those separating the interior of the self from the exterior, revelation from concealment, and vitality from mortality. To view them was to question the difference between the natural and the supernatural, the human and the demonic or subhuman. No wonder, then, that Picasso felt that he had discovered the masks' "sacred, magical purpose," the capacity to express both presence and absence, and thus both to vivify as well as to mortify or even terrorize the soul.

Picasso knew that, as the psychoanalyst Schiffer puts it, the psyche exercises a "representational intelligence [allowing] the psychic apparatus to internally represent an absent event or object, to recall the past, to depict the present, and to anticipate the future in one swift, organized mental act."<sup>23</sup> It is this capacity to restore the presence of the absent and to represent the past that enables the hunter to place the dead animal's horns upon an altar for the sake of recompense, sacrifice, and further petition. However, we also need to remember that sacred representations, like Picasso's masks, reveal the terror underlying the psyche's primitive magic: the threat of nonbeing. Thus, in attempting to recover the sources of its own being, the psyche finds it necessary to renew and repeat its most unpleasant, even terrifying experiences..

## **6. Despair and the chronic failure of the sacred**

What indeed are the causes of the sacred's chronic and recurrent fatigue? Why is it that sacred beliefs and practices, symbols and objects offer at best only temporary relief from ontological anxiety, the terror of time, and the threat of nonbeing? Is it simply because the secularization of time itself in the long run exposes the sacred to the dangers of institutionalization, obsolescence, irrelevance, and inefficacy? Alternatively, is there something within the sacred itself that tends to run out of time?



Speaking of nature in general and particularly of water, Ricoeur points out that “the sacred power of nature is first attested to by the fact that it is threatened and uncertain. The sacred universe, after all, is a universe that emerges out of chaos and that may at any instant return to it. . . . Through this power of water, as well as that of shadows, demons, and infernal regions, as well as in a multitude of other ways, nature speaks of the depth from which its order has emerged and toward which chaos it may always regress.”<sup>24</sup> Is it because sacred practices are irrevocably connected to the cosmos that they may come to undermine the individual’s self-confident possession of—or access to—a being that is vital, lasting, and essential? To be sure, the light returns, with the possibility of enlightenment, but only for the time being, and its days are always numbered.

Some scholars would not agree that in the world of the Neolithic, the sacred was unreliable, intermittent, and subject to fatigue. Certainly, the archaic world was at some pains to avoid a point of no return, especially in the relationships between the living and the dead. For instance, the passage from Colin Richards’s studies of the Neolithic, quoted above, suggests that no one in that world was lost forever; even the dead had a permanent place in the cosmos. There was no absence that could not be turned at least into a temporary presence: no form of death that could not at times be transformed into life by the sacred. Through the sacred, nonbeing could be transformed into being, and time itself, otherwise a source of erosion, decay, and eventual loss, could be turned into a stream of renewed consciousness. Thus, Richards credits archaic peoples with what we have come to think of as agency and a sense of connectedness: a form of protection against existential helplessness.

Other anthropologists have also imagined the Neolithic world as relatively immunized or even inured to the passage of time. The archaeologists Fowler and Cummings note, “In particular, the experiences generated at megalithic sites may have referred to prior experiences of rivers, the sea, the shore, and their associated cultural qualities. . . . Those depositing quartz at a stone monument may have been ‘making it wet,’ marking it out as appropriate for acts of transformation. The products of the sea may have been interpreted as the manifestation of spiritual qualities associated not only with the sea and rivers, but with the dead. . . . Perhaps creatures living in the sea bore a close affinity with the dead (and also therefore the living); perhaps they were even manifestations of the spirits of the dead.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, Fowler and Cummings suggest that the bones of deep-sea fish embodied remnants of ancestral flesh washed out to sea, a

conjecture made more probable by evidence that these fish were not part of the Neolithic diet.

If Neolithic peoples lived, moved, and had their being in a sacred cosmos or an “enchanted universe,” they would have had some defense against ontological anxiety and despair. After all, time would have conveyed eternity, and the living would have had access to the dead, at least at the winter solstice when the rays of the sun might penetrate the innermost reaches of an ancestral tomb: once on the way down and again on the way back. Presumably, if I had returned to the Buddhist cave east of Bombay on the 22nd of December, I would have had the same temporary reassurance of the Buddha’s presence. Nonetheless, I was there long enough to experience the return of the Buddha into darkness. His presence was soon superseded by his absence, his being by apparent nonbeing. The moment itself was fundamentally critical because it was intended to be.

Thanks to the continuing influence of the work of Mircea Eliade, some scholars continue to assume that there was a Neolithic cosmology that promised the return of everything over time. Ends would inevitably turn into beginnings, the departed would always and forever return, and even apparent absences would suggest enduring presences. However, it is not entirely clear that there was such an endemic cosmology; rather, Neolithic communities may have shared a family of similar practices and symbols but lacked beliefs that would integrate their separate communities into an overarching cultural framework.

Precisely because these ancient sites and practices incarnated the critical moment of passage between states of being or between being and nonbeing, Neolithic communities may have lacked cosmological immunization to despair and may have faced the perennial possibility of irrevocable darkness. So it is with the solstices. The practice of sanctifying the power of the sun perpetuates the possibilities not only of return and renewal but also of decline and loss. Any time of illumination, whether in a cave, a stone circle, or a shrine proves to be fleeting. That is why the sacred is vulnerable to the passage of time, carries within itself its own tendency to secularity, and is therefore prone to cultural fatigue.

That is also why even in antiquity we may speak of a regressive cycle linking critical moments of apotheosis with a slow process of decline that leads to despair. Eventually, the most intense of appeals needs to be made to the highest cosmic power or authority. One solstice or pivotal moment prefigures a second, equally critical moment. To be sure, the regressive cycle in American society links Anglo-American authoritarianism to a

culture of despair, but it has a generic link to the regressive cycles of antiquity: links that at times also appear to have been genetic.

For instance, as Jean Pierre Vernant has noted, through such dramatic and forceful techniques of re-presentation and reenactment as the anamnesis of the ancient Greek bard, the sacred does restore the presence of the absent by evoking and reincarnating the past within the present. Nonetheless, the spectre of loss even attends the remains of old attachments. As Vernant, in his magisterial studies of ancient Greek culture has noted, the Greek stela or grave monument and the standing stone along the wayside not only call for remembrance and perhaps also tears but also evoke a presence uncannily experienced as an absence. Even the statue of Athena in the Parthenon testifies to an eternal absence, the real Athena being firmly embedded in and reserved for the heavens. Thus, the psyche may become self-alienated by its desperate attempt to preserve and recover attachments to unreliable persons or objects: to a parent, perhaps, or a partner. Even the objects and people in whom the psyche finds reassurance of its own being also tend to rekindle its existential anxieties, its doubts as to how essential and significant, vital or vulnerable it may be.

## **7. The fatigue of the sacred**

In the early years of the American republic, collective memory sanctified the nation's present by linking it both with ancient history and with the eternal. The "sacred fire of liberty" had been entrusted to this new nation; the historical fate of freedom and equality would henceforth depend on the capacity of the new republic to bring history closer to its end. As I have noted in connection with the many reproductions of an engraving of Washington's apotheosis, Washington was believed already to be enjoying the company of the immortals, and, as we shall later see, if John Adams was right, he had become the Americans' god.

This is not to say that the sanctified memory of Washington was impervious to the passage of time or immutable. On the contrary, Barry Schwartz has described the ways in which, following the Civil War, interest in the image of George Washington increasingly reflected the progressively egalitarian and populist interests of the American people. Washington's image took on the details and hues of these later portraits in the public imagination, even as some earlier images continued to shape the way in which respects and devotion were paid to Washington's symbolic but no less real presence in American life. For Schwartz, the past is

“neither totally precarious nor immutable, but a stable image upon which new elements are intermittently superimposed.”<sup>26</sup> I would simply add that even sanctified memory is shaped by the passage of time, much as the centuries of water streaming over massive boulders shaped the rocks that covered Neolithic tombs; even sacred emblems of the eternal may suffer erosion in and through the passage of time.

There is ample historical reason to doubt my argument that the sacred has a tendency to wear out over time. For example, Anthony Grafton has shown that Albrecht Durer created self-portraits that claimed an affinity with – or even an origin from – the image of Christ embedded in the “sweat cloth on which an image of the divine features was imprinted without the work of human hands.”<sup>27</sup> As Grafton puts it, “Durer took care to show viewers that he himself had made an image of a traditional kind, the value of which supposedly depended on the fact that no one had made it.”<sup>28</sup> I would suggest simply that Durer was manufacturing the sacred, in the sense that he was combining a sense of his own presence with a reminiscence of the possibility of mortality and absence. He was also creating novelty: an unprecedented form of artistry as well as of self-portraiture, that was a manifestation – a re-presentation - of the past in the present, like the relics from the catacombs now resident among the congregations of Catholics in Europe. That is, Durer was creating a form of the sacred that was intermeshed with the secular: a portrait of eternity subject to the passage of time. He was abolishing the difference between the ancient and the modern; as Grafton puts it, “he underlined the modernity and the contingency of an icon.”<sup>29</sup> Like the African masks that appalled and fascinated Picasso, these images may not only have once shielded the psyche from the terror of loss and abandonment but over time have become reminders of what has been lost and now confront the nonbeing. I will therefore be demonstrating that, despite the anxious and chronic inventiveness of the psyche, the sacred wears out, loses its vitality, reminds its devotees that something is missing, and even rekindles the primitive fear of abandonment.

The regressive cycle that eventually links despair to a longing for a Caesar thus gains momentum from the fatigue of the sacred. As that fatigue becomes more evident and widespread, existential differences reassert themselves: those between presence and absence, the past and the present, the dead and the living. As that despair becomes more acute, it exacerbates fears that it is becoming too late for the nation to overcome its divisions, to realize its historical mission, and to assert its rightful sovereignty among the nations. The more intense become social and

existential differences, the more urgent become both cultural despair and the longing for a new leader who embodies the nation's original virtues and vitality.

Now, in addition to the contributions of sacred fatigue to the regressive and authoritarian cycle, consider the effects of the secularization of time itself. As the temporal becomes more separate from the eternal, and as the living become far less conversant with the dead, the fleeting moment becomes, well, more fleeting; thus, in a secular society the past and the future are constantly being revised and novelty becomes routine. However, with all this temporizing, the past is never fully present or fully completed; neither does the future ever really begin. Thus, the critical moment of JFK's administration and particularly of his death has not yet been placed within any larger time perspective other than what is offered by decennial commemoration by the mass media. There has been no sanctified commemoration and no apotheosis but only the frequent and poignant representations by the media, of Kennedy's death. There has been no way for future sacrifice to redeem the president's death or for that death to be underwritten by eternity. It would be as if, in the Middle Ages, when relics from the catacombs were being exhumed and placed in churches, they were merely reminders or curiosities rather than models of devotion for the living to emulate and embody.

I will therefore be arguing that the effect of the cultural fatigue of the sacred is amplified by the process of secularization. Thus the assassination of John F. Kennedy has become, in retrospect, a point of no return: a focal point of cultural despair rather than an end that could have been transformed into a new beginning or a loss that could be transformed by a renewed sense of Kennedy's presidential presence. Many despair over America's loss of a future that could have been realized had John F. Kennedy not been slain. Furthermore, the media presentations of the Kennedy years and of his assassination may well have reminded Americans that their society is subject to chance and violence even at the highest level. Fifty years of media-based commemoration have intensified an awareness of contingency; anything could happen anywhere at any time.

It is entirely possible that American society is now dominated by a sense that the nation's power over death is increasingly obscure and uncertain. In addition, the sacred may fail to come when it is called and thus prove itself to be a cause rather than a cure for intense ontological anxiety. Thus, cultural despair takes refuge in longing for a Caesar or Führer whose power over death will offer a lasting defense against

ontological anxiety. Such a Caesar would also transcend national divisions and restore lost virtues, vitality, and even sanctity to the nation's center.

As I have noted, we will be examining the notion of a "state of exception" in which the sovereign's will has power over life and death without offending either divine or human law. As Agamben himself notes of the "state of exception," politics and life become intimately intertwined; all of life becomes serious, that is, sacred. However, a new Caesar will never provide the longed-for grounding of the human being in relentless, indefatigable, indeed absolute sovereignty. We need to be reminded that the sacred "originally expresses both life's subjection to a power over death *and life's irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment*" [emphasis added].<sup>31</sup>

As religion loses its control over the way a modern society maintains its moral or territorial boundaries, the sacred finds sanctuary in the interstices and margins of the social system. There the sacred makes its appearances in the informal, more familiar, local, personal, and peripheral aspects of a secular social order, where it has increased immediacy and personal relevance. Indeed, the more that the sacred thrives in the interstices and margins of the social system, the less susceptible is the sacred to fatigue. Consider these highly local and intimate manifestations of the sacred: a yellow ribbon on the front porch of the family of a hostage; a Confederate flag in a parlor window, in a local park, or in a sports stadium; the uncommunicative but nonetheless sanctified body of a patient in a coma or of a fetus in the womb; or the practice of a highly personal spiritual discipline.

Thus, it becomes incumbent on the aspiring Caesar to amalgamate and subsume these more vital but decentralized forms of the sacred into his or her own emblematic presence and ultimate authority; otherwise the dispersed and intimate, informal aspects of the sacred will make it all the more difficult to recruit committed and even sacrificial citizens. In the end, the cure for more extreme forms of secularization in the life of a nation may well be a Final Solution that requires the evocation of the sacred at the political and cultural center that sanctifies all of life.

## 8. Summary

In sacralizing the critical moment, a society exercises its capacity to ground its being in time itself. That is why Neolithic societies sanctified the critical moments presented by each solstice as well as the very places