

# American Civil Religion, The Lost Cause, and D.W. Griffith: *The Birth of a Nation* Revisited

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The centrality of religion to the discourse of American national identity is rarely addressed by students of film. Whilst scholarly interest as to the nature, role, and persistent importance of religion within the national culture of the United States has, from Tocqueville onwards, been enduring and extensive (e.g. Niebuhr, 1937; Herberg, 1960; Berger, 1961; Mead, 1963, 1967; Bellah, 1967, 1975, 1980; Ahlstrom, 1972; Marty, 1977, 1985; Bellah et al, 1985; Douglas, 1988; Wuthnow, 1989; Warner, 1993; Stout and Hart, 1997; Swift, 1998; Albanese, 1999), this vast literature is largely ignored within the confines of cinema studies. We might, as a matter of course, assume that the movies have, like religion, exerted a profound influence upon the American imagination. But there has been little serious examination of interrelations between the key medium of the twentieth century and the religious ideas, images, people, and institutions which continue to exert a significant influence over the most modern and powerful nation on Earth (see Appendix One). Responding to this neglect, the following article re-examines D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a picture that needs no introduction to scholars of film history or twentieth century American culture. It argues that, as racist as Griffith's picture certainly was, the white Southern, and quite explicitly Christian, perspective of the film was integral to the way it sought to enact a transformation of the ways and means whereby Americans imagine themselves to be members of a nation specially favoured by Providence. Because the development and growth of the supposedly "secular" medium of cinema in the United States created a cultural arena which was free, to some extent, from Protestant suppositions as to the primacy of the word, the impact of Griffith's movie actually helped to establish an important public space in which non-Protestant groups could offer their own view of what it means to be an American.

## Media, Religion, Culture: An "Evolving Paradigm"

Revered for its cinematic qualities whilst reviled for its racism, *The Birth of a Nation* remains "an uneasy presence in American film history" (Silva, 1971:1-2). From its first public showings in 1915 through to the present, the landmark status of *Birth* has both resulted in and, in turn, been sustained by, a substantial flow of writing on the movie (see Appendix Two). Yet although the debates prompted by Griffith's picture retain their relevance and pedagogical value, the considerable attention already lavished on the film appears to make it increasingly difficult to find anything new and worthwhile to say about it. Indeed, the prominence of *Birth* might be seen as hindering scholars in the field of early and silent cinema, even as they reassess Griffith's contribution to the medium. Scott Simmon (1993: 132), for example, argues that the singular status of *The Birth of a Nation* as a breakthrough in film art "continues to keep contemporary audiences from seeing what does remain vital in silent film". In the contemporary context then, further work on the film does demand some sort of justification.

Acknowledging this, the present article derives its starting concerns not so much from the fields of film studies or film history but, rather, from an emerging scholarship, much of it associated with Stewart Hoover, which seeks a broad reconsideration of relations between media, religion, and culture (see Appendix Three). For Hoover and Shalini Venturelli (1996: 251), the development of media and cultural studies has been hamstrung by a "blindspot" in regard to "the realm of belief, spirituality, ontology and deep meaning conventionally constructed as 'the religious'". In a trenchant critique of this state of affairs, they argue that scholars of media and contemporary culture should recognize that despite the widespread assumption of secularization being an inevitable accompaniment of the rationalizing processes of modernity, and the observable decline in the power, influence, and membership of the formal religious institutions of Europe from the Enlightenment onwards, "non-rational" beliefs and practices persist as fundamental components of meaning-making in contemporary western society. Re-reading the roots of contemporary social theory in the legacies of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber, "the theorists who have most directly addressed and constructed religion as a legitimate field of inquiry", Hoover and Venturelli (1996: 251-58) interrogate the traditional analytical distinction between the sacred and the profane, and propose secularization as "a transformation in religious -- not extra-religious -- consciousness", thus radically locating the category of "the religious" within the realm of "the secular", especially the mass media. Indeed, because it acknowledges the privatization and commodification of social and cultural life under capitalism, a supplanting of "religious consciousness with a world of objects", such a position seems particularly suited to the analysis of contemporary American culture.

As Tocqueville (1966, first published in 1835) recognized early on, the formal separation of church and state enacted in the First Amendment, ensured, somewhat paradoxically perhaps, that in contrast with much of Europe, religion in the United States would remain a vital social resource. Thus, while it could be argued that religion is but a constituent of culture, the fact that it has been set aside and protected in the American context, makes it an especially important aspect of the national process. It is this which makes Hoover and company's stress on religion in relation to media and culture so useful here. Even in America, however, where 95 per cent of the population profess a belief in God (Gallup Poll cited in Ostling, 1995: 72), religious belief and practice have become more and more private in orientation. This trend may have roots in the democratic and anti-institutional traditions of American religion (e.g. Hatch, 1989), but it also sits comfortably with the current widespread social and political emphasis on notions of personal identity, individual choice and the cultivation of the self (e.g. Bellah *et al*, 1985; Roof, 1999). Modern consumer capitalism's capacity to provide an ever greater number of often quite specialized goods and services has resulted in a proliferation of media sources available to Americans. In this media-saturated environment, "religion" is something which tends to exist outside institutions and traditions in the competitive space of the symbolic marketplace. Here, any clear demarcation between the categories of the "religious" and the "non-religious" all but disappears as symbols are appropriated in novel contexts and the meanings associated with them transformed and or subverted. What Hoover and his associates seek to understand is how people make sense of their lives within this historical situation. In other words, they ask how are (religious) meanings made in the contemporary context?

For scholars seeking a better understanding of American culture, this "evolving paradigm" (Hoover, 1997: 285-87) of theory and research is rich in possibilities. At present though, the understandable emphasis on the contemporary manifestations of this conflux of media, religion, and culture has led those involved in this broad project away from any

thoroughgoing examination of the history which has created this particular set of circumstances. How unique are they? What events, people, social forces or institutions have influenced them? Indeed, the inadequate interrogation of history within this emerging scholarship would appear to have resulted in the neglect of possible insights regarding the interrelationship between religion, media, and culture within the discourse of United States nationalism.

As has already been noted, commentators on American culture have long recognized the fundamental importance of religion as a force within the life of the nation and its citizenry's understanding of themselves as a "chosen" people fulfilling their "manifest destiny". In 1967, a famous article by Robert Bellah argued that in spite of the formal separation of church and state, the symbols and rituals of US nationhood actually represented "an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion" (1967: 1), beyond denominational factionalism, which served to provide "an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality" (1967: 21). As the flood of responses to Bellah's notion of an American civil religion confirms, such formulations indicate the problems inherent in the defining and theorizing of "religion" (see e.g. Richey and Jones, 1974; Bellah, 1975, 1980; Wilson, 1979; Kelly, 1984; Zelinsky, 1988; Hammond et al 1994). Yet, as elitist and prescriptive as Bellah's original conception was -- his thesis avoided the role of popular culture entirely -- it remains important because it reminds us of the utter centrality of religion, the category of the religious, and attendant questions of existential meaning to the debates surrounding American national identity. Bearing this in mind then, it is a little disappointing to find little or no scholarly interest in relating the religious aspects of US national identity to the work of the media in developing and maintaining an American "imagined community".

An obvious case in point is the position of Hollywood in relation to the national religious context. For all the visibility of religious ideas, narratives, and symbols in the work of such quintessentially "American" film-makers as DeMille, Capra, and Ford, to mention but a select few, and the decisive role played by the Catholic Church as the industry came to adopt the Production Code during the 1930s, there is little writing which considers the emergence of motion pictures as both a reflection of and an influence upon the complex religious economy of the United States (see Appendix One). This is odd. Reflecting upon the initial success of the movies in a United States experiencing the transformations wrought by large-scale immigration, industrialization, urbanization, and the dissolution of Protestant hegemony leads Garth Jowett (1976: 35), for example, to argue that far from being "a lucky innovation, arriving merely at a propitious time", cinema actually "answered a deep social and cultural need of the American people". In the early decades of the twentieth century, motion pictures were not simply a new and compelling form of entertainment. They also provided ideas, information, stories, and new forms of social activity to an uncertain, multicultural, and rapidly changing America. In a sense therefore, the American cinema might be seen as an appropriately modern mechanism of "orientation", in the religious sense of that term proposed by Charles Long (1986: 7): "that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world". Be that as it may, the point to be stressed here is that Hollywood did not develop independently of the religious dimension of American life, but, rather, in dialogue and negotiation with it.

If we accept that the foundations of contemporary media culture were, to a large extent, laid during Hollywood's "golden age", the potential value of a sustained and critical investigation of American film history from a vantage based in the "evolving paradigm" of media, religion, and culture, thus becomes apparent. Obviously, any attempt to understand media, religion,

and culture in the present demands a reconsideration of the past. Yet there is much to commend such a project to those with no prior interest in such a framework. The global hegemony of American media and popular culture may be the furthest extension of a national culture which cannot help but bear the marks of tensions and conflicts relating to economics, gender, race, region, sexuality and social class, all played out amidst the historical transformations and upheavals accompanying modernization. However, what is often forgotten by scholars pursuing such issues in relation to the United States is the extent to which they have been inflected by religious ideas, images, and institutions there. Taking this religious dimension seriously, therefore, offers a way of deepening our understanding of American culture and the role of film in it. Hence, we come to revisit *The Birth of a Nation*.

As both a picture and an event, *Birth* represents an obvious subject for the kind of historical enquiry outlined above. Not only was it a watershed in terms of the development of the American film industry but it can also be seen as "almost a myth of origin" (Taylor, 1991: 16) for the serious study of cinema itself. Yet, where it was once described by Philip French (quoted in Robinson, 1993) as "the incontestable keystone movie in the history of American cinema", Griffith's picture tends now to be remembered as little more than an expression of unreconstructed Southern white supremacism. Indeed, apart from a provocative piece by Russell Merritt (1990) recent treatments of *The Birth of a Nation* have done little more than re-state the obvious. Contemporary scholars appear baffled as to why such a racist piece might once have been so important and popular. Seeking to revitalize a once lively debate, and thereby demonstrate the sorts of insights available to film studies which acknowledge the importance of religion in America then, the following discussion reasserts the importance of *Birth*. Addressing the film in terms of the religious and cultural context which informed its production, it posits the film as a response to a crisis in American Protestantism. It contends that the racism of the picture was not an end in itself but a function of the director's largely successful attempt to enact a transformation of how Americans might continue to understand themselves as a "chosen people". In that sense, we might even see *The Birth of a Nation* as marking an important turning point within the history of the American civil religion.

### **American Protestantism in Crisis**

The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were a time of massive changes in American Protestantism. Up to this period, "Protestantism presented an almost unbroken front in its defense of the social status quo" (May, 1949: 91). As Phillip Hammond (1983: 282-83) notes, despite the failure of "pre-revolutionary legal efforts to make America a 'Christian nation'", and the subsequent constitutional separation of church and state enshrined in the First Amendment, the principle of voluntarism had, somewhat paradoxically, ensured that the United States was "nonetheless a 'Protestant nation'". From around 1880 onwards, however, social changes began to undermine the hegemonic influence Protestant denominations had hitherto enjoyed:

The Civil War had called nationhood into question. Immigrants, many of whom were not Protestant, were coming in droves. Factories were being built, and millions were moving out of rural settings into cities. America was becoming a world power. Public schools were distributing the products of the Enlightenment to more and more people, as evolution and textual analysis became part of everyday intellectual baggage, and higher education grew increasingly secular. Labor was organizing, and the vicissitudes of a capitalist economy were becoming evermore apparent. (Hammond, 1983: 282)

By 1920, these upheavals had resulted in the mainstream denominations losing much of their power and influence within American society. This did not happen without a struggle, however, and it is the reaction of Protestant America to the situation it confronted in the decades prior to the First World War, which is of primary concern here.

The public response of the Protestant churches was a growth in social criticism which found its wider expression via the reform movements of the so-called Progressive Era. Clearly, it would be misleading to explain the complexities of the progressive era as little more than the result of a crisis within American Protestantism. The scale, and multi-faceted nature of the historical forces which were transforming the United States at the time, defy such simplifications. Nevertheless, in terms of its cultural expression and elevated moral tone, progressivism was very much a product of, and legitimated with reference to, the American Protestant tradition. Given the widely acknowledged prominence of churchmen such as Josiah Strong, Walter Rauschenbusch, and William Jennings Bryan within the various reform movements, not to mention Woodrow Wilson, the "Protestant Pope", as well as the rhetoric of "Christian principles", "confessions of faith", "crusades", and "social purity", routinely employed by the progressives, there is a sense in which American public life of the time took on the characteristics of a nationwide religious revival (e.g. Marty, 1985: 337-71).

In fact, the Evangelical flavour of the reform period disguises the fact that at no time was there an especially unified or coherent "progressive" programme. It may be the case that as US society grew more complex, as well as more powerful and prosperous, progressivism represented what Robert Wiebe (1967) has described as a "search for order". Yet, in terms of social origins, tendencies, and the causes they adhered to, progressives were relatively diverse. The moral stridency of progressive rhetoric could only partially disguise the era's ambiguities, contradictions and paradoxes. Instead, progressive invocations of the "old-time religion" support arguments that the problem reformers sought to solve was the problem of *progress*; "specifically, how American society was to continue to enjoy the fruits of material progress without the accompanying assault upon human dignity and the erosion of the conventional values and moral assumptions on which the social order appeared to rest" (Abrams, 1971: 209). What progressives appeared to want was nothing less than a reconstitution of the crumbling Protestant empire in a radically new set of circumstances. *The Birth of a Nation* was to articulate this desire in startling form.

### **Griffith and the Lost Cause**

Whilst the pictures of D.W. Griffith are clearly a product of their time, the evangelical tang to the progressive era is often ignored in the discussion of them. For example, Stanley Corkin's analysis of *The Birth of a Nation* grounds the director's aesthetic sensibility in "the reigning impulses of Progressivism" (1996: 4) but ignores the significance of the religious background to the reform movements. There are suggestions, however, that such concerns were close to the director's heart. Thus, Lary May (1983: 68) emphasizes the importance of the director's Methodist background in describing the way in which Griffith's work gave aesthetic form to the assumptions, tensions and dilemmas of the Progressive era in its quest to affirm a traditional moral order in the face of rapid change. Stressing the "explicitly Protestant tone" of Griffith's films, he notes that "reporters referred to [Griffith] as the 'messianic savior of the movie art, a prophet who made shadow sermons more powerful than the pulpit'" (1983: 61).

May's (1983: 60-95) discussion of Griffith elides the issue of race almost entirely and tends to romanticize the latter's commitment to the ascetic individualism associated with the Puritan

tradition. May's commentary is useful nonetheless, though, in so far as he attempts to articulate the way in which Griffith himself understood his success and cultural impact as coming not from a cold calculation of audience tastes "but because he saw himself as 'above politics' and portraying feelings 'bred in the bone'" (May, 1983: 67). This attitude, May argues, was rooted in Griffith's Southern Methodist upbringing. Appealing to all classes, but "never noted for its originality of thought, or rebellion from authority, the Church emphasized a life of self-denial and sinlessness, which would transform not only the believer, but the entire world as well" (1983: 67). Sitting comfortably with the innate conservatism of the reformers, this formative orientation underpinned Griffith's belief that the cinema was "a moral and educational force" and "the universal language" predicted in the Bible. Like a revivalist preacher, a skilled director "might provide an experience that could convert the soul from evil to good" (May, 1983: 72-73).

May (1983: 73) suggests that Griffith's particular and essentially religious understanding of "realism", that the camera was a neutral but necessarily active instrument of truth and its revelation, led him away from the conventions inherited from the traditions of the stage towards the development of a style which succeeded in dramatizing the lives of "real people in real settings". Indeed, May's (1983: 74) analysis of Griffith's working methods indicates how various techniques were subordinated to serve the ideas and moral vision of the director "and show God's will surfacing in the chaos of material life":

On a darkened screen, a small dot would appear. Slowly it opened and a beam of light revealed the action. As the drama unfolded, it was as if the viewer used a spiritual eye to penetrate the truth of life...special lighting would show a world where the demarcations of good and evil were clear. Often heroes and heroines were bathed in light, while villains appeared dark and sinister in the shadows. The audience would have no doubt as to who was among the elect, and who among the damned... This was clearly a Protestant concept of redemption, and Griffith was well aware of it... Faith in these 'images of pure and simple beauty,' explained Griffith, 'allowed us to believe it was done by God himself'.

Positing the cinema as an agent of moral transformation might appear rather old-fashioned now. But Griffith's ideas also represented a positive response to progressive worries about the moral worth of the cinema (e.g. May, 1983: 43-59; see also Uricchio and Pearson, 1993, 1994). Indeed, for all the moral concerns articulated in his pictures, Griffith's movies were often antagonistic towards "meddling" reformers. For Griffith, it was the still under-developed medium of film, rather than the campaigns and movements of progressives, which offered the greatest possibilities for the moral regeneration of America as the churches began a slow retreat from the mainstream of national life.

Although May's discussion of Griffith's Methodist background is useful here, he does not really address the way the director's own religious orientation came to shift from his original Methodism. Reflecting the broader process wherein religion was increasingly seen as something private, Griffith would eventually become a freemason, holding "no strong sectarian beliefs" (Schickel, 1984: 33). Thus, while the religious allegories in several films including *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* support Schickel's assertion that Griffith "harbored somewhat loftier, somewhat more romantic, somewhat vaguer religious sentiments" (33), this aspect of the director's work cannot be aligned with the reform movements of the progressive era in as straightforward a way as May appears to claim.

In a discussion of Griffith's career which develops a more sophisticated view of the religious background to Griffith's work than May's, Scott Simmon (1993: 147) notes the consistency with which the director's pictures reflect a view of reformers as meddlers who "exacerbate the conditions they profess to ameliorate" (Simmon, 1993: 147). Like May, Simmon (1993: 152) argues that Griffith's movies were informed by a belief in the medium's capacity for moral reform, and admits "that Griffith's world remained a religious one". Nevertheless, the director's relationship with the reformers was characterized by antagonism, Simmon (1993: 150) contends, "primarily because he [wa]s battling them over common ground. Both [we]re claiming the territory of moral instruction... newly open for contention because of the evident retreat of organized religion". Drawing on accounts of American culture which stress the "feminization" of the Protestant tradition (Douglas, 1988), and a privatistic "shift from a Protestant to a therapeutic orientation within the dominant culture" (Lears, 1981: xviii), Simmon (1993: 153) proposes Griffith's work as "representative of another, more complex cultural transformation in America: the breakup of Puritan unity (in which spirituality had been expressed through work) for more purely practical manifestations of moral reform". Thus, he reiterates the profound significance attached by the director to the development of both the form and status of motion pictures:

Griffith's real ambitions for the movies as art are inextricably tied into [the] claim...that art is a truer guide to moral reform than is any organized society of reformers. Put a little more strongly, art...now fills the reformist role that was once reserved for organized religion, a role that organized reformers can only counterfeit and pervert (1993: 150).

The suggestion here is that Griffith understood the medium of film not just in terms of art but as something which might perhaps succeed religion in the provision of moral guidance and "ceremonies of community" (1993: 153).

On occasion, however, Griffith's religiosity led him into excess. The inability to "resist flying in angels on wires or Christ himself to beatify grand finales", most famously in *The Birth of a Nation*, leads Scott Simmon (1993: 152) to suggest that the director's "most literal religious imagery plays quite inauthentically" and thus query "how much of Griffith's darker world of God and fate was genuine devotion, how much conventional piety, and how much another scheme to legitimate movie art". Yet, one might also argue that such problems reveal the confusions of the film-maker because they reflect the contradictions of his time. D.W. Griffith's career as a director began and developed at a time when the traditional hegemony and moral authority associated with American Protestantism had been called into question by the cultural upheavals wrought by non-Protestant immigration, large-scale industrial development, and rapid urbanization, as well as the fundamental ideological challenge of positivist science. In the cinema, itself a product of scientific development, this positivist worldview was reflected in the assumed and unconsidered "realism" of the screen image. Still, for all its problems, Protestant Christianity remained the basic symbolic currency of American public life. The early motion picture industry (represented by Edison and the Trust) was indeed controlled, almost entirely, by white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men (May, 1983: 251-52). Griffith, it would appear, responded to his cultural environment by attempting to reconcile the apparent veracity of the movies with the traditional, Bible-based conception of the absolute, widely accepted across America as the ultimate source of national legitimacy. Perhaps the inauthenticity Simmon detects in Griffith's pictures arising from overt and literal deployment of Christian imagery indicates the inherently problematic nature of such a

project: squaring belief in a pragmatic and economically effective empiricism with faith in an invisible yet still personified moral order.

By 1914, and spurred by the success of longer Italian-made feature films, often with a religious theme, like Guazzoni's *St. Francis* (1911) and *Quo Vadis* (1912), Antamoro's *Christus* (1914), and Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914) (Schickel, 1984: 186; Herx, 1988: 1343), Griffith's aspirations for the medium led him to embark upon his most ambitious production yet; an adaptation of Thomas M. Dixon's best-selling "historical romance of the Ku Klux Klan" set in the Reconstruction period, *The Clansman*. Right from the portentous decision to begin filming on July 4th, Griffith understood the project as more than just another "sausage", as he dubbed his earlier short films for Biograph (Billy Bitzer quoted in Barry, 1965: 19). Mindful, perhaps, of the approaching fiftieth anniversary of Appomattox, Griffith not only supplemented the original source with material from Dixon's (1902) novel *The Leopard's Spots* as well as the stage-play of *The Clansman* (1906), but also chose to preface his film with a lengthy section devoted largely to the Civil War itself. And, it is in the director's particular, regional, white, Southern, standpoint on the history he sought to depict, his passionate identification with the fate of the white South during and after the Civil War, that we find the key religious meanings articulated by the film (see Appendix Four). For Griffith, "setting the record straight" on the Civil War and Reconstruction represented an opportunity to revitalize the traditions of Protestant America via the modern technology of film.

As the first Southerner elected to the presidency since the Civil War, the victory of Woodrow Wilson in 1912 was an important symbol of the reconciliation between the North and South that had taken place since 1865. For some sections of American society though, the re-integration of the South into the life of the nation merely reflected the unwanted resurgence of ideals and values which the Civil War had supposedly put paid to. Describing how the position and status of blacks was weakened during the Progressive era, Thomas Cripps (1963: 111) writes that

In the decade before Woodrow Wilson's first administration the reforms of urban Progressives were essentially for whites only. Despite the Negro's rising wealth and increasingly successful struggle with illiteracy, the tenuous *rapprochement* that a few Negro leaders had with Theodore Roosevelt, the formation of active and influential agencies of reform like the National Negro Business League, and (at the behest of several white liberals) the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League, the Wilson years represented the continuation of a decline. Residential segregation was increasing; the ballot box was a distant memory to many Negroes; Jim Crow had become the custom in public accommodations. For the Negro there was a denial of reform even before the resurgent Democratic party brought to Washington a return to Southern ideals.

In context, therefore, *The Birth of a Nation* certainly reflected and reinforced certain trends in American life, and we should recognize attempts to play down or separate out the film's depiction of blacks from its other qualities (e.g. Jacobs, 1939; Fulton, 1960; O'Dell, 1970; Wagenacht and Slide, 1975) as misguided. Racism is fundamental to the film in terms of both form and content (e.g. Rogin, 1987; Taylor, 1991). As "obvious" (Sorlin, 1980: 30; Staiger, 1992: 152) as the racism of *Birth* is though, there may yet be value in reconsidering D.W. Griffith's denials of racist intent, both in the film itself (via intertitle at the beginning of Part Two) and in the public debate which followed the picture's release (e.g. Griffith, 1915 a, b &



c, 1916). While they clearly fail(ed) to mitigate the picture's negative portrayal of African Americans, taking the denials seriously leads one to recognize that its racism is an inevitable consequence of the way Griffith sought to mobilize a cultural authority deriving from the South's sense of itself as the conscience of an America in the throes of modernization.

Discussing the picture from a black Marxist perspective, Cedric Robinson (1997: 63) suggests that Cripps (1963) overemphasizes the regional origins of white racism in twentieth-century America: "for some decades prior to the opening of the 20th century Northern as well as Southern and even European racist intellectuals had played an important part in the formation of American national culture, academic life, medicine, art, and popular culture". In Robinson's analysis of *The Birth of a Nation*, the historical importance of the film stems from its collusion with the interests behind the economic and political transformation of America into a global power at the beginnings of the twentieth century. He argues that the movie's depiction of national redemption in terms of race "established cinematic protocols and racial icons" (1997: 161) which, in turn, helped naturalize the arrangements of "a robust industrial society voraciously appropriating a vast but disparate labour force which required cultural discipline, social habituation, and political regulation" (1997: 163). Robinson's contention that white racism is something more or less endemic to modern American culture does elide crucial differences of degree though. Unlike the situation in the North, discrimination between white and black lay at the heart of the South's economy and culture prior to the Civil War. By 1865 that way of life had been sacrificed on the altar of progress and national unity. This fact may not elicit much sympathy in comparison with the fates suffered by other peoples as a result of modernization and colonial expansion. In discussing *Birth*, however, there are gains to be made from seeking to understand the human dimensions of the colossal and humiliating defeat suffered by the white South.

The longstanding furore engendered by the racism in *The Birth of a Nation*, and the necessary condemnation of that racism which has emanated from various quarters (e.g. Cobleigh, 1915; Hackett, 1915; Noble, 1948; Carter, 1960; Sarris, 1969; Bogle, 1973: 10-18; Rogin, 1987; Taylor, 1991; Robinson, 1997) has in recent times led away from the recognition and/or consideration of the movie as a sincere expression of the trauma experienced within the American South as a result of defeat in the Civil War. Indulging a tendency to stereotype the white South in a way which merely reverses what was played out in Griffith's picture, the current critical orthodoxy would ask us to believe that the once extensive popular appeal of the film rested entirely upon its now embarrassing white supremacist standpoint. The complexities and contradictions of the movie are all subordinated to its racism, while its long term importance and influence are played down. Yet, the sad fact remains that racist "othering" is by no means as aberrant as we might wish it to be. Moreover, while boundaries dividing "us" from "them" may indeed be crucial in the construction and maintenance of social groups, they do not in themselves explain the attractive force which serves to bind a society from within (e.g. Schlesinger, 2000). Thus, although Fred Silva (1971: 7) notes that D.W. Griffith shared "with many Southern writers and apologists a failure to confront the race issue honestly", he argues that "without excusing the obviously racist sentiments of *The Birth of a Nation*, the viewer must recognize that Griffith presented the values of a conquered people who viewed the rubble of what they had conceived as a civilized, moral way of life". This cultural orientation, commonly known as the "Lost Cause", is derided by some commentators as one of many clichés via which the Civil War is remembered in America "not as history but as legend" (Lang, 1994b: 3) (see Appendix Five). Dismissing the Lost Cause in such a way, however, ignores the deeper, religious, significance attached to it as the South came to terms with defeat.

For Charles Reagan Wilson (1980a & b), the cultural translation of this shared need evolved into something he dubs "the religion of the Lost Cause" or "Southern civil religion". By no means the first to engage with the mythic aspects of the Lost Cause (e.g. Tindall, 1964; Osterweis, 1973), Wilson lays particular emphasis on the position and role of the clergy within what H.L. Mencken came to describe as "the Bible Belt". Thus, instead of dismissing the Lost Cause as mere "myth" or "legend" Wilson (1980a: 232) argues that "judged by historical and anthropological criteria, the civil religion that emerged in the postbellum South was an authentic expression of religion". Indeed, whilst subsequent work by Gaines M. Foster (1987) challenges such attempts to cast the Lost Cause in religious terms, the theoretical understanding of "religion" Wilson applies to the extensive empirical evidence he marshals in support of his thesis is rooted in fairly conventional notions of religion as a response to chaos, disorder and socio-cultural crisis; made manifest in symbols, myths and rituals; dividing existence into two realms, the sacred and the profane, via which members come to perceive their society as having a sacred or holy quality. As Wilson (1980a: 232) notes, "for postbellum southerners such traditional religious issues as the nature of suffering, evil, and the seeming irrationality of life had a disturbing relevance".

Although Wilson is guilty of ignoring non-mainstream churches in his account (Durant, 1981: 286), his thesis is built on the recognition that religious identities should not be seen as singular or monolithic. Examining the white South's cultural response to defeat in the Civil War, he provides substantial support for a view of religious orientation as multi-faceted, multi-levelled, and responsive to changing circumstances; a communicative process rather than a fixed object. Hence, in adapting Bellah's (1967: 1) notion of "an elaborate and well-institutionalized" American civil religion distinct from the denominations to the specific historical context of the postbellum South, Wilson (1980b: 18-36) lays great emphasis upon the active and popular creation of, as well as participation in, ceremonies articulating the Lost Cause during the half-century or so after Appomattox. In his analysis, there is an almost Catholic richness to the material culture of the Southern Civil Religion and the significance attached to a whole pantheon of Southern saints via pilgrimages, relics, rituals, and a range of institutions (including the Ku Klux Klan) extending beyond the Protestant churches which remained the bedrock of the distinct cultural environment of the South. For a film-maker like Griffith, moreover, the materiality described by Wilson provided a tangible basis for the translation of the word-based, Protestant traditions undergirding the social and moral order into the visual forms of the silent motion picture. Crucial in this respect, is the way a distinctively Southern appropriation of the jeremiad, a rhetorical form often associated with the Puritans of New England, helped proponents of the Lost Cause celebrate white Southern culture by defining it in relation to the North.

In Sacvan Bercovitch's (1978: xi, 9) classic account, "the American jeremiad" is "a mode of public exhortation, ... a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity, the shifting 'signs of the times' to certain traditional metaphors, themes, and symbols". Thus, it "has played a major role in fashioning the myth of America" (1978: xi). Originating in Europe, where it "pertained exclusively to mundane, social matters, to the city of man rather than the city of God", its purpose was transformed by the Puritans in order "to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God" (1978: 9). According to Bercovitch (1978: xiii), the cultural and social utility of the American jeremiad within the nation's civil religion derived from its capacity to enable a reconciliation of the changes demanded by the developmental processes of Americanization and modernization with the religious values represented in the Puritan tradition; a critical commentary on the

present made legitimate in the terms of a mytho-historical past. Delivered on special ritual occasions, it fulfilled a hegemonic function in the classic Gramscian sense.

In the postbellum South, the jeremiad was adapted in the service of the Lost Cause by clergymen concerned at the threat to a distinct white Southern identity carried in the economic, political, and social changes coming from the victorious North. Typically, it was delivered on those occasions which mourned or celebrated the Confederacy; rituals recalling the blood sacrifice of the Civil War: "the dedications of monuments, the burials of veterans, Confederate Memorial Day, fast and thanksgiving days, meetings of the local and regional Confederate veterans' groups -- all brought forth the Lost Cause sermon, prophesying Southern doom if virtue was not preserved" (Wilson, 1980b: 82). As already indicated though, such prophetic affirmations of Southern identity were expressed in terms defined in relation to the North. Indeed, its regional twist gave it a profoundly anti-modern tone. Even before the war, the South "had developed a new image of itself as a chivalric society, embodying many of the agrarian and spiritual values that seemed to be disappearing in the industrializing North" (1980b: 3). Associated "virtues" like self-restraint and feminine purity informed the development of a "'cultural nationalism', the longing of a homogenous people (of the same blood and lineage, and possessing common artifacts, customs, and institutions) for national political existence" (1980b: 3). The Civil War, however, cast serious doubt over the whole idea of a separate Southern identity. Asserting the importance of this identity, the Lost Cause jeremiad urged constant vigilance to preserve it. Noting that "a major theme of the Lost Cause jeremiad was the wickedness of the Yankees", Wilson (1980b: 81) describes how

in addition to warning Southerners of their own decline, the jeremiad cautioned Southerners to learn from the evil North. The danger of the South's future degradation was readily embodied in the North's image, with some ministers even teaching that the South must serve as a model to the corrupt North. By maintaining Confederate virtue in the postbellum world, the South would be an example to the North in future days of reform. This was a Southern mission worth achieving.

Moreover, although reconciliation between North and South came as the Civil War moved ever further into the past, the South did not abandon the religion of the Lost Cause nor the prophetic functions which attended it.

The turn of the century marked a revival of the American civil religion in the South. Important in this respect was Southern support for the Spanish-American War. Yet, despite such Northern-led encroachment onto the terrain of the Lost Cause, it did not signal the latter's disappearance. Instead, white Southern preachers suggested that "because of its historical experience... the South was quintessentially American. As the rest of the nation had changed because of industrialism, urbanization, immigration, and other forces of modern America, the South had remained most like the nation of the Founding Fathers" (Wilson, 1980b: 167). Only as a result of the white South's willingness to fight and sacrifice for liberty and constitutional rights in the Civil War when the North was "going after other gods" (R.A. Goodwin, rector of St John's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia, quoted in Wilson, 1980b: 166) did traditional American values and institutions survive. For white Southerners, interpreting the Lost Cause in this way enabled them to renew their participation in the life of the nation whilst retaining pride in their own regional identity. Addressing the nation as a

whole, it is this revived and religiously based cultural authority which Griffith, with the aid of Thomas Dixon, sought to mobilize in *The Birth of a Nation* (see Appendix Six).

### **Blood Sacrifice: The Regeneration of the American Civil Religion**

That *Birth* sought to promote traditional white Southern attitudes to race is indisputable. The film not only portrays freed blacks as unfit for full citizenship, but posits (black male/ white female) miscegenation as a threat to the integrity of the American nation. As one or two commentators have pointed out, however, *The Birth of a Nation* should not be seen as a response to a race crisis. The incidence of racial violence had gone into something of a decline since its peak in the 1890s, reflecting perhaps the degree to which African Americans "had been rendered both politically impotent and socially invisible" (Stokes, 1996: 72; see also Cripps, 1963; Sorlin, 1980: 108). In context, therefore, it makes more sense to see how white progressives might have used blacks as a useful symbol of the chaos apparently threatening America. Sympathy for the southern perspective on race not only grew with each successive wave of non-Protestant, non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants or black migrants to the cities, but fitted neatly with the then prevalent social scientific ideology of Social Darwinism (Schickel, 1984: 79; Stokes, 1996: 73-74). Re-examining the way in which Griffith sought to frame his white supremacist thesis therefore reveals the extent to which it was intended to act as a means rather than an end in itself

Immediately after the opening titles, and Griffith's own "plea for the art of the motion picture", the very first image of the film shows a Puritan minister blessing the trade in Africans, which, the film asserts, "planted the first seed of disunion". Probably citing a now absent title from this prologue, an early and sympathetic reviewer of the film comments "but when slave trading was no longer profitable to the North the 'traders of the seventeenth century became the abolitionists of the nineteenth century'" (Bush, 1915: 176). Hence there follows a short scene depicting "a typical Northern congregation" (1915: 176) with a preacher demanding freedom for the slaves. In some prints, the preacher inspires a white matriarch to offer her arms to a black child, but she pushes him away as soon as he reaches her, presumably in response to his body odour (e.g. Bush, 1915: 176). It is a somewhat surprising and unsettling opening to the film. The Puritan North, the traditional touchstone of American nationalist sentiment is being portrayed as misguided and full of meddlers and hypocrites. Such antagonism towards the North might have been understandable given the South's living memories of defeat and humiliation in the Civil War. There was, however, more to Griffith's opening gambit than mere rancour.

By the end of the film, with harmonious union between the whites of North and South having been restored by the Ku Klux Klan, Ben Cameron and Elsie Stoneman are rewarded with the sight of Christ ushering in the Kingdom of God followed by a vision of "a city upon a hill", a clear reference to one of the most famous sermons of the American Puritan tradition, John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630), a reminder to those who would soon found Boston of their responsibilities to God. As camp, dated, or even ridiculous as this final sequence might appear to us now, it remains an important indicator of the sensibilities and intentions which shaped the film. It is the film's own commentary on what its makers hoped to have achieved during the intervening three hours.

The overriding goal of *Birth* is a revitalization of American nationalist feeling; by first, recalling the national blood sacrifice of the Civil War, and subsequently, mythologizing the "redemption" of the South. It almost goes without saying that, for all Griffith's denials of

racist intent, this aim is predicated upon an understanding of the sacred core of US national identity as fundamentally white and constructed in opposition to blacks. Thus, Clyde Taylor (1991: 21) summarizes how

as a national epic, Griffith's film asks the spectator in the White subject position to perceive the essential scene of national development as the South instead of colonial New England or the Western frontier... to shift the core nationalizing experience from the land, and the taming thereof, to miscegenation, to Blacks, and the taming thereof.

The genius of the film, however, lay in its invocation of the Lost Cause, most obviously through Ben Cameron's evident willingness to sacrifice himself on the battlefield. Moral authority thus established, Griffith went on to portray the white South as an oppressed people thirsting for justice and liberty. Seeking thereby to justify the violent white supremacism of the Ku Klux Klan, *The Birth of a Nation* reworked the Puritan and revolutionary traditions of the United States in romantic, visual terms well suited to the emerging consumer society.

By furnishing an actual, albeit crude, and not metaphoric vision of the kingdom to come, not only for Ben and Elsie, but also for the audience, D.W. Griffith was staking a claim on behalf of the film industry for those aspects of the national imagination which had hitherto been largely the preserve of historians, political orators, and the Protestant churches. At the very least, Griffith's audacious attempt to shift the symbolic and, thus, religious foundations of US nationalism from Massachusetts Bay to somewhere south of the Mason-Dixon line, was a sign that, in practical terms, the narratives via which Americans continued to understand their significance as a "chosen people" or "New Israel", would derive less and less from the pulpit and the Bible, and ever more from the "stories in pictures" produced in the studios of Hollywood. Indeed, we might even see *Birth's* rehearsal of the Lost Cause as having provided Hollywood with a narrative conceit capable of reaffirming *faith* as the basis of American life throughout the rest of the twentieth-century. Whether this development can be thought of as something authentically "religious" depends, of course, on how one understands the term "religion". What is worth suggesting here, nonetheless, is that the development and growth of the supposedly "secular" medium of cinema in America offered up an important public space for the renegotiation and transformation of American national identity, its civil religion if you will.

Assessing the long term impact or "effect" of *The Birth of a Nation* is by no means as straightforward as one might expect, even in terms of its impact upon race relations. While the film certainly gave a spur to the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the late teens and early twenties (Simcovitch, 1972), several commentators have suggested that the picture gave considerable impetus to the development of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People by indicating the pressing need for a more militant stance against the racism both of individuals such as Thomas Dixon and American society in general (e.g. Schickel, 1984: 299-300, Taylor, 1991: 32). A similar line of argument can be pursued with regard to the impact of *Birth* on the religious economy of America. In ideological terms, Griffith's project was a conservative one rooted in, and referring to, the Puritan tradition widely taken to be the wellspring of American national identity. As confirmation of how important the movies were becoming, however, the film further undermined the already crumbling cultural authority of the Protestant denominations. The creation of a cultural arena which was free, to some extent, from Protestant suppositions as to the primacy of the word, would provide certain non-Protestant groups, Catholics and Jews in particular, with a point of entry into the

American cultural mainstream. In the work of such luminaries as John Ford, Frank Capra, Louis B. Mayer, and the Warner brothers, this fresh blood would, in turn, regenerate and revitalize the cultural roots of US nationhood and American religion via the screen. *The Birth of a Nation* showed them all how it could be done.

### **Appendix One**

There are, of course, some exceptions to this general neglect of American religion within film studies. Probably the most developed work in this area describes the role of the Catholic Church in the struggles over movie censorship which led to the imposition of the Production code in 1934 (e.g. Black, 1994; Walsh, 1996), although only Francis Couvares (1996) seeks to locate the basis for Catholic involvement in the censorship debate within the broader religious economy of the United States. Similarly, Babington and Evans' (1993) study of the Biblical Epic makes the point that it is impossible to understand the significance of that most derided of genres without engaging with its origins in "the unique context of American religion" (1993:12). Whilst often tending towards a somewhat one-dimensional view of religion, i.e. as institutional, hegemonic, and reactionary, there is also some useful work examining the religious influence upon early and silent cinema (e.g. Maltby, 1990; Cosandey, *et al*, 1992; Uricchio and Pearson, 1993). For a comprehensive overview of writing on religion and film, which also discusses approaches to the movies derived from theology or religious studies (e.g. May and Bird, 1982; Martin and Ostwalt, 1995; Miles, 1996; Marsh and Ortiz, 1997) see Jozajtis (2001: 46-99).

### **Appendix Two**

Obvious points of entry into the literature on *The Birth of a Nation* are to be found in the wide-ranging collections edited by Silva (1971) and, more recently, Lang (1994a). For obvious reasons, the latter brings more contemporary critical perspectives to bear on the film, including an important piece by Rogin (1987) examining the politics of the picture from a psycho-analytical perspective, and Staiger's (1992: 139-153) extensively referenced discussion of the reception history of *Birth*. Further reading might include Merritt (1990), Taylor (1991), Corkin (1996: 133-60), Dyer (1996), Williams (1996) Robinson (1997).

### **Appendix Three**

Thus far, the most important product of this project has been the collection of essays found in Hoover and Lundby (1997). In their introduction, Hoover and Lundby (1997: 3) argue "that media, religion, and culture should be thought of as an interrelated web within society", and write that their book "represents a first step in the direction of this more complex understanding of these phenomena." For further developments see Hoover (1998), Morgan (1998, 1999), Mitchell (1999), Forbes and Mahan (2000), Hoover and Clark (2002).

### **Appendix Four**

Although Kentucky was not a secessionist state during the Civil War, and eventually sided with the North, Griffith's family were slave-owners prior to the war, his father fought for the Confederacy, and the family shared many of the hardships which befell the defeated South. As Griffith wrote in his autobiography, "one could not find the sufferings of our family and our friends -- the dreadful poverty and hardships during the war and for many years after -- in the Yankee-written histories we read in school. From all this was born a burning

determination to tell some day our side of the story to the world" (Griffith and Hart: 1972: 26).

## **Appendix Five**

The term can be traced back at least as far as Edward A. Pollard's (1867) *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* which cast the defeat of the South in tragic terms without any renunciation of white supremacy. Thus Lang's dismissal of the Lost Cause, reflects the traditional liberal suspicion of the Confederate legacy and its influence upon American culture. Such a position, however, is by no means a consensual one, as evidenced by recent controversies over the flying of the Confederate flag from state Capitols in South Carolina and Mississippi, and the writings of modern apologists for the South. Indeed, whilst the attempt to portray the South in a more complex and sympathetic way is most closely associated with conservatives such as John Shelton Reed (1992, 1993), co-editor of the journal *Southern Cultures*, this partial rehabilitation has also found support from less likely sources, such as the Marxist historian Eugene D. Genovese (1994).

## **Appendix Six.**

Although Wilson (1980b: 100-118), stresses white supremacy and the Ku Klux Klan as key foci for the "Southern civil religion", highlights the cultural impact of Thomas M. Dixon's racist fiction, and briefly acknowledges the popularity of D.W. Griffith's adaptation of that book in *The Birth of a Nation*, he does not pursue the long term implications of the film's articulation of the Lost Cause any further.

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