

SEARCHING FOR THE ARC OF HISTORY: THE SECULARIZATION OF AMERICAN POLITICS

ABSTRACT: *Michael Rosen's The Shadow of God includes an account of historical theodicy, which is the idea that the arc of history justifies the ways of God. Formulated by the German Idealists, its American expositors influenced the ideas of the nineteenth-century American theologian and activist Theodore Parker. As the originator of the phrases "arc of history" and "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," Parker's influence extends to presidents and Supreme Court justices, demonstrating the long and influential afterlife of the German philosophical discourses that Rosen explores. But examining this afterlife also challenges the assumption that we can discern the arc of history without the monotheistic presuppositions present in Parker.*

Keywords: *Kant; Hegel; Schleiermacher; Parker; King; Obama; Bush; Lincoln; theodicy; race.*

Michael Rosen's *The Shadow of God: Kant, Hegel, and the Passage from Heaven to History* (Haward, 2022) provides an intriguing account of how the German Idealists theorized a theodicy that turns to history to justify the workings of divine justice in the world. Inspired by this account, I will turn to some important episodes in the history of American political theology to depict the afterlife of the Idealists' historical theodicy. American political theology does not admit of the peaks of

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Critical Review 1–16

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ISSN 0891-3811 print, 1933-8007 online

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2023.2259650>



philosophical achievement that is found among the Idealists, and boasts no geniuses to rank with the European master thinkers. But the connections to living political movements and experienced conditions are closer, creating a point of contact between the life of the mind and the life of political communities. Further, it will allow us to excavate some of the theological underpinnings of the seemingly secular idea that the arc of history bends towards justice.

Religion of Feeling?

Theodore Parker was an American theologian who, in 1852, published a collection of ten sermons in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Dedicated to Ralph Waldo Emerson, the greatest popularizer (and adapter) of European philosophy to America life in his time, the third sermon, titled “Of Justice and the Conscience,” contains the following remark:

God is unalienable in men, the universal human claim, the never-ending gift for them. Can God ever depart from his own justice, deprive any creature of a right, or balk it of a natural claim? Philosophically speaking, it is impossible,—a contradiction to our idea of God; religiously speaking, it is impious,—a contradiction to our feeling of God. Both the philosophic and the religious consciousness declare it impossible that God should be unjust. (Parker 1852 [1853], 75)

At first glance, the passage suggests the influence of Schleiermacher. Religion, at least in part, is said to call on “our feeling of God.” Although the author does not put it quite this way, the appeal to feeling allows him to insulate religion from the kind of empirical challenges that were becoming impossible to ignore by the middle of the nineteenth century. This insulation, in turn, saves religion from modern doubt by placing it beyond the possibility of objective critique. Even if the Bible were shown to be the composition of human authors, even if the miracles were shown to be highly unlikely, even if demonstrations of the existence of God were shown to presume what they purport to show, my *feeling* of being subject to a “higher power” is an experience that cannot be doubted.

Like the *pharmakon* of the Greeks, this defense against doubt is both treatment and poison. On the one hand, the appeal to feeling sidesteps controversies about Biblical authorship, the possibility of miracles, and the status of metaphysics that dominated religious debate in later stages

of the Enlightenment. If religion rests on a personal *feeling* of God, it simply does not matter whether anyone else thinks that feeling is reasonable. Religion is an aesthetic condition rather than a rational judgement.

On the other hand, this same move deprives religion of its claim over those who do not share this experience of the divine. We either feel something or we do not. We might try to elicit a feeling in others, but we cannot rationally persuade others to feel something that they simply do not. The consequence is that religion increasingly retreats into the apparently limited circles of genuine experiencers, slowly losing its grip on those Max Weber famously described as the “religiously unmusical” (quoted in Swatos and Kivisto 1991, 347). Peter Ghosh (2008, 246) suggests that Weber’s analogy to music is derived from William James, who emerged from the same intellectual milieu that produced Parker’s passage. But the aesthetic analogy may also echo Schleiermacher, who argued that music, above all other arts, expresses feelings rather than representing thoughts.

Parker did not foresee the disenchantment that fascinated Weber. But he shared the intuition that experience is not enough to sustain religion after claims to theological knowledge have ceased to be credible. In addition to a feeling of God, we have access to an *idea* of God. And that idea brings religion under the ambit of philosophy rather than remaining a purely subjective experience.

Socratic Religion

We can begin to see, then, that Parker, if he was influenced by Schleiermacher, was not a full-throated adherent, but was also influenced by a more rationalist conception of religion. Indeed, Parker’s idea of God is neither strictly empirical nor metaphysical. As indicated by the title of the sermon (“Of Justice and the Conscience”), Parker’s God is essentially moral. To the extent that we understand something of God, it is because we understand something of justice. Unlike feelings, which vary from person to person, “in the world of human consciousness, there is . . . a law, an ideal mode of action for the spiritual force of man” (Parker 1852 [1853], 69). This law is justice: “justice is the constitution or fundamental law of the moral universe, the law of right, a rule of conduct for man in all his moral relations” (ibid., 71).

Along with a religion of the heart, then, the sermon also makes the case for a religion of the head. If the former owes something to

Schleiermacher, the latter lies in the older tradition that Rosen (2022, 24) describes as “Socratic religion.” By this, Rosen, drawing on Nietzsche, is thinking about religion as a strategy for reconciling ourselves to the world not by withdrawing from it, or aesthetically contemplating it, but by trying to make it rationally intelligible to us (see *ibid.*, 43ff.). A religion that is Socratic is thus eminently rationalistic.¹

To understand the differences—and tensions—between a religion of the heart and of the head, it’s helpful to present them conceptually as well as historically. The premise of the religion of feeling is that reality is fundamentally unintelligible, at least in the relevant case: when it comes to the reality of the divine. We can *say* how we *feel*. But we cannot *know* anything that exceeds our experience. This leaves space for a kind of working facility, to which James and the pragmatists would try to focus our attention. But it rejects claims to certainty even in the sphere of experience—let alone concerning matters superhuman.

In contrast, Socratic religion rejects the built-in skepticism that makes experiential religion characteristically modern even when it takes apparently fundamentalist forms. Instead, Socratic religion depends on the assumption that all of reality must, in principle, be open to our understanding. Otherwise, we are condemned to live out our lives in confusion, seeing (in the words of St. Paul) “through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

It might be asked why it is so important for us to understand things, particularly those that transcend our immediate experience. The Socratic answer, as Rosen (2022, 43–47) develops it, is that while we may not enjoy direct encounters with God, we face the upsetting reality of suffering and death. It is relatively easy to ignore propositional claims about the attributes of God. In contrast, it is very difficult to reflect on the ubiquity of pain without wondering what it’s all for. Unlike other forms of rational theology, Socratic religion is driven less by the quest for *knowledge* than by the quest for *meaning*. It is a variety, in other words, of theodicy, which seeks the justice of God in the wreckage of human existence.

One does not need the Bible to engage with this issue. But Rosen (2022, 44) observes that “Socratism connects naturally to the omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent God of Christianity. The monotheistic God is the wise author of the universe, guaranteeing that it is not just open to knowledge, but that it shares in its creator’s goodness and (ultimate) justice.” Christianity is famously ambiguous on the question of whether human beings are or can be morally good. But it

characteristically teaches that, fallen though we are, we operate with an overall scheme of creation that partakes of divine goodness.

Christianity offers a further advantage to Socratic religion that its monotheistic predecessor, Judaism, and universalist rival, Islam, do not have, or at least not explicitly or consistently: It promises a personal after-life involving both rewards and punishments. If we all face consignment either to heaven or to hell, it does not matter that, so far as we can see, the just often perish while the wicked flourish. In the long run, and in a manner that we cannot directly observe, each will receive what God alone knows that they truly deserve.

Socratic religion, in this sense, has a long and distinguished career that goes back to the Hellenistic encounter between Biblical revelation and Greek philosophy and extends well into the Enlightenment. One of Rosen's services in *The Shadow of God* is to insist that Kant was not only serious about his essays in theodicy, but also that he saw ultimate retribution as an essential component of divine justice. Rosen's Kant believes that it is not enough simply to articulate the laws of morality—it is also important to understand the necessity of punishment for those who violate it.

Yet it is not so easy to escape skepticism. We may believe that “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” (Psalm 19:9). But generations of Christian theologians extending back to Augustine warned against the assumption that the ways of God are intelligible to man. In Calvin and his followers, such warnings coalesced around depictions of God as a cosmic sovereign, who was not constrained by laws of his own making. Contrary to subsequent caricatures, these defenders of divine omnipotence did not depict God as capricious in his distribution of salvation and damnation. But they did insist that God was, strictly speaking, unfathomable, and that what he might know to be just need not appear that way to mere mortals.

The deferral of theodicy to the afterlife was also open to challenge. For one thing, it has the potential to excuse an enormous amount of cruelty in this world. If you rely on God to settle accounts later, then it does not matter so much how people are treated here and now. This suspicion that reservation of rewards and punishments to a different plane of reality merely excused suffering is one of the reasons religion became so suspect to Marx and other radicals in the post-Kantian tradition.

Even if we can determine with certainty what justice requires of us, moreover, can we be equally sure that the anticipated consequences

will really follow? More than a few human beings seem willing to sacrifice their immortal souls in exchange for temporal goods. The problem of temptation is familiar to Christianity and received powerful expression in the Faust story. By Goethe's time, though, doubts about the nature of God were becoming sufficiently widespread to make a demonic wager look, perhaps, like a reasonable bet.

It's at this historical point that Rosen discerns a crucial modification in the approaches to theodicy. In the hands of Fichte, Hegel, and other Idealists, God's justice is less a matter of personal rewards and punishments in another world. Instead, it is expressed with increasing clarity in the historical rise and fall of human communities. We do not know whether we are going to heaven or hell, these philosophers admitted. But we can contribute to the achievement of justice in this world through actions whose consequences we can hope to predict even if we cannot ascertain them with total certainty.

This theodicy is still Socratic insofar as it seeks to rationally understand the purpose of human life, avoiding the despair that Rosen (2022, 194) calls "the alienation of arbitrariness" (the alienation we experience when we think our life is subject to arbitrary forces). But it, too, is modern insofar as it tries to shift the justification for religious conclusions from logical certainty to experience: not, to be sure, the individualized, subjective feeling on which Schleiermacher tried to reconstruct religion, but rather the collective experiences of human beings through time, which comprises the distinctive knowledge of history. Reflection on history does not *demonstrate* that there is a benevolent, omnipotent God because, as Kant showed, nothing can do that. But it makes such a conclusion reasonable rather than an irrational leap of faith.

Historical Theodicy in Parker

I cannot assess the accuracy of Rosen's account of German intellectual history, but it helps make sense of the sermon with which I began this discussion. Alongside the religion of feeling, it appeals to a philosophical religion of justice. Unlike Kant, though, Parker breaks with the Socratic and Christian tradition of assigning the sanctions of moral law to another world. Heaven is a metaphor, Hell an impossibility under a loving god. Therefore, "this justice of God must appear in the world and in the history of men; and, after all 'the wrongs the patient merit of the unworthy takes,' still you see that the ploughshare of justice is drawn

through and through the world, uprooting the savage plants” (Parker 1852 [1853], 84).

The displacement of heaven with history could give the impression that the author is another Leibniz, who concluded that ours is the best of all possible worlds. But Parker insists that the enactment of justice does not consist in unbroken improvement. To the contrary, it is characterized by reversal, revolution, upheaval, and indeed punishment. History “is a bloody process, but justice does not disdain a rugged road; our King does not come always on an ass’s colt” (*ibid.*, 87). The clouds are gathering once again for an irruption of divine judgment: “terrible questions are getting ready for a swift tribunal. Injustice cannot stand” (*ibid.*).

At this point, let me step back and contextualize Theodore Parker. He could very well be considered the leading liberal theologian of America’s antebellum period. Born in 1810 in Lexington, Massachusetts, he studied at Harvard Divinity School and occupied a series of pulpits in the Boston area. At the peak of his influence, his 28th Congregational Society—now known as the Theodore Parker Unitarian Church—had around 2000 congregants, including Louisa May Alcott, William Lloyd Garrison, Julia Ward Howe, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Grodzins 2002, 491).

It took until 1843 before Parker visited what is now Germany, when he was already a prominent figure. But even before then, he was a key mediator of German thought for American audiences. He struggled to speak the language, but he read Kant in the original at Harvard, and also read Herder, Heine, and Goethe (Grodzins 2002, 66 and 381).

Despite his interest in imaginative literature, Parker insisted that the glory of Germany letters lay in its philosophy. In addition to Kant, he cited Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel as the unparalleled leaders of the field. What attracted Parker to German literature, though, was a sensitivity to religion that was unparalleled since “the palmy days of Greek writing” (quoted in Grodzins 2002, 202). Parker saw no heresy in speaking of Socrates, Kant, and Jesus in the same paragraph, if not the same breath.

While Parker was more able than his contemporaries to read German thinkers in the original, he does not seem to have been the most discerning reader of these figures. Perhaps this is because, as his biographer concludes, Parker relied more heavily on (German) secondary sources than on the original texts (Grodzins 2002, 276–77). Still, as we saw above,

he read and understood enough to arrive at a historical theodicy and at both a sentimentalist and rationalist conception of God. He learned from Kant that there can be no demonstrative proof of the existence of God. He learned from Schleiermacher that, in the absence of knowledge, religion must live partly in the heart (Grodzins 2002, 289–290). His relationship to Hegel is more complicated. In a journal entry of 1841 he described as “revolting” the idea that God develops self-consciousness through human history (quoted in Grodzins 2002, 137). Yet by 1852 he came to believe, as “Of Justice and the Conscience” indicates, that theodicy could only take the form of human progress, inspired by a feeling of obligation to God, while guided by an understanding of His justice.

Parker’s shift toward that conclusion has something to do with his own historical situation, as well as the course of his reading. By the late 1840s, he had moved away from the Transcendentalism of his earlier career and toward abolitionist activism. It was not so much a shift in mode of argument than a shift towards unpacking the implications of his own ideas. Earlier, he had focused on the proper understanding of religious texts and the cultivation of individual sensibilities. Now he emphasized the social demands of religion, which included living up to the standard of divine justice.

The collective wrong that he believed to demand both punishment and overcoming was slavery. He suggests that when contemplating this great crime, even a skeptic cannot avoid thinking of divine justice: “Jefferson trembled when he thought of slavery and remembered that God is just” (Parker 1852 [1853], 85).

This observation sets up the crux of the sermon, which is probably more familiar to readers than either Parker’s biography or the quotations introduced thus far. Summarizing his argument to that point, Parker (*ibid.*, 84) enjoins his readers:

Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.

This statement shows how Parker, in his unsystematic way, tried to bridge the gaps between morality and knowledge, feeling and knowledge. Per Kant, we cannot prove the existence of the God. But we

can know the requirements of justice—that is, what God wants from us. On its own, adherence to justice is a difficult, even thankless task. But we have an intuition, irrepressible even in dark times, that a higher power will not only help us do our duty, but also ensure that duty has the appropriate effect. Men have speculated in word and image about heaven and hell, and it is not inherently wrong to do so. But if we want more powerful support, if not proof, that our feelings are not merely our own, we should look to the course of history—and especially to the history of nations as they rise and fall according to their success in realizing “a reign of righteousness, and kingdom—no, a Commonwealth—of justice on the earth” (ibid., 100).

How to Explain the Struggle Over Slavery?

If these phrases and general frame of ideas are familiar, it is less because Parker himself is widely read than because they were adopted by other, more famous figures. Martin Luther King paraphrased it in several forms throughout his career, most famously at the conclusion of the 1965 protest march from Selma, Alabama. King (1965) asks how long it will take to establish “a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience,” before answering: “Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Former President Barack Obama also used the phrase in various speeches. He liked it so much that he had it woven into the rug covering the floor of the Oval Office.² In fact, “The Arc of the Moral Universe is Long, But it Bends Towards Justice” is the not the only formulation derived from Parker that made in onto the presidential carpet. Among the other four quotations Obama selected was “Government of the People, By the People, For the People,”—a motto that first appeared in this precise form in Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, but is likely adapted from Parker’s speech on “The American Idea” at the 1850 New England Anti-Slavery Convention, where he affirmed “democracy, that is, a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people; of course, a government after the principles of eternal justice, the unchanging law of God” (Parker 1867, 41).

It is a long way from Kant to the White House carpet. And if it were a simply a question of reception, that trajectory might seem trivial. It is neither new nor inherently interesting that ideas, arguments, and concepts emerge in one context and migrate to another. Yet I think

Parker's adaptation of the Idealists' Socratic religion sheds light on three elements of Rosen's argument that deserve further inquiry: the methodological issue on how to explain a divergence between ideas and material interests; the relationship between analytic and continental philosophy; and the way American politics remains under the shadow of God.

The first issue centers on what Rosen (2022, 28–32) calls “the Acceptance Problem,” that is, the question of “how it is that ideas come to have force in society.” According to Rosen (*ibid.*, 32–38), the currently dominant approach in many academic circles takes the form of “Instrumentality-In-Legitimation-Out,” which is (to simplify) the claim that ideas become persuasive when they are compatible with material interests. This explanatory strategy can be traced at least as far back as Marx. The implication is that ideas about justice are ultimately a form of ideology that becomes dominant when it justifies actions or institutions that its subjects are already inclined to support for non-moral reasons.

Rosen points out that the problem with that kind of explanatory unmasking is that it makes the people who accept those ideas seem like cynics or “dupes” (Rosen 2022, 37). They are cynics if they adopt lofty justifications for doing things that they *really* want to do because they enhance their wealth and power. They are dupes when they fail to perceive the connection, naïvely believing themselves to be motivated by principle. Most problematic, explanatory models that adopt Instrumentality-In-Legitimation-Out struggle to explain why some people accept ideas that seem to go against their interests. They appear to be not merely naïve, but useful idiots of manipulation.

It is not coincidental, I think, that the limitations of Instrumentality-In-Legitimation-Out models are most obvious when it comes to religion—the paradigmatic example of “false consciousness” in Marxist analysis. For it is notorious that religious motives, or at least religious justifications, can encourage activities and ways of life that seem insane from a material standpoint. “If thou wouldest be perfect,” Jesus counseled, “go, sell that which thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21). It is true enough that Christians have not always, and perhaps not often, followed Jesus' advice. But the Instrumentality-In-Legitimation-Out explanation struggles to explain how an obligation to the poor became a fixture of the Christian social imaginary—and one that was not altogether without practical consequences.

Nor is the problem limited to private morality. The argument of *Leviathan* is driven by Hobbes' fear that subjects will sacrifice public interests in peace and security to their understanding of what they owe to God. To overcome this tendency, Hobbes provides elaborate reinterpretations of sacred texts to justify obedience to the civil sovereign. If Instrumentality-In-Legitimation-Out accounts were accurate—if ideas consistently followed interests—this enterprise would seem to be unnecessary.

Responding to these and other difficulties, Rosen proposes what he calls a "Legitimation-In-Legitimation-Out" approach. In this model, the "interests" to which ideas respond are more existential than material or political. Specifically, human beings need to find ways to understand life as meaningful despite the unavoidable facts of suffering and death. On this view, we adopt certain ideals not necessarily because they make us richer, more secure, or more powerful, but because they provide order and purpose in a world that often seems chaotic and meaningless.

Rosen argues that Legitimation-In-Legitimation-Out explanations are more sensitive to the moral and political role of religion than Instrumentality-In-Legitimation-Out explanations. Specifically, the former explanations can, more than the latter, better account for why people are sometimes willing to struggle, fight, and die for their understanding of justice *even when they have no obvious (material, personal) reason to do so*. True, theological doctrines may promise personal benefits in the next life—"treasure in heaven"—or, in the historical form Rosen emphasizes, collective rewards in a future state of society. But, like Rosen, I find it implausible that these potential advantages can be reduced to material "interests."

This is evident in the conflict over slavery that culminated in the Civil War. Instrumentality-In-Legitimation-Out explanations, especially in Marxist versions, would claim that white abolitionists like Parker were, wittingly or not, promoting the interests of the Northern bourgeoisie. They may have sincerely believed slavery to be wrong, but it was convenient for them to believe that just at that stage of capitalist development when manufacturing was supplanting agriculture and free labor was proving more productive than slave labor. Whatever beautiful souls like Parker and his allies may have believed, the argument goes, a convenient overlap between idea and material interest sustained the political coalition necessary to elect Lincoln, preserve the Union, and ultimately impose the 13th Amendment on the defeated South.

This interpretation is not altogether wrong, even in the crude form sketched here. But as Parker's sermon suggests, that interpretation is not sufficient. The struggle over slavery and ensuing Civil War was not merely a struggle between rival modes of production. It was, as Mark Noll (2006, 75) has observed, a "theological crisis" in which many Americans were led by their religiously-inflected beliefs about the interpretation of Scripture and influence of providence to act in ways that offered no perceptible material advantage, and at considerable personal, political, and financial risk. The reduction of the debates about slavery, union, and basis of political order to Instrumentality-In-Legitimation-Out severely distort our understanding of figures and periods if, as Noll (*ibid.*, 11) argues, religion was "more important than any other center of value" in society.

Nor was Parker a lonely example. A widely popular (and extremely controversial) writer and speaker, his ideas were part of a campaign of genuine persuasion that eventually attracted supporters who had not previously supported the abolition of slavery (and in some cases had little to gain from that outcome). We find another trace of this campaign in the lyrics to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" by Parker's friend and ally Julia Ward Howe. "As [Jesus] died to make men holy," goes a verse that is rarely sung these days, "let us die to make men free." King's Selma speech culminates in a recitation from the same song.

While Rosen does not address the Civil War in *The Shadow of God*, it offers us essential if not exhaustive methodological insight in explaining one of the great moral struggles of the last two centuries.

Bridging the Continental and Analytic, the Theological and Political

Yet another possibility opened by Rosen's book is that of bringing American philosophy into an apparently German philosophical conversation. In other contexts, Rosen has challenged the conventional distinction between so-called "Continental" and "analytic" schools of philosophy, with the former traced to largely German origins and the latter presumed to be more characteristic of Anglophone institutions and thinkers (see, e.g., the interview in Marshall 2022). Yet that distinction leaves little space for American thought, especially (but not only) in the nineteenth century. As Parker's example shows, the American religious and social

idiom from the Transcendentalists, at least through the Social Gospel, were heavily influenced by Kant, Hegel, and (in practice) their popularizers and expositors.

Such influences were not accepted with universal enthusiasm. Early in his career, Parker engaged in a pamphlet battle with conservative theologians centered around Princeton, who accused Parker and his New England friends of pantheism, libertinism, and even atheism (Grodzins 2002, 193–200). Although the implications were not fully evident, these debates prefigure disputes between theological modernists and fundamentalists several generations later. Bracketing a detailed account of these developments, we can say that while the modernists lost the war for the pews, they won the battle for academia and the institutional churches. The effect of this success was to foreground, in American theology (and thus in much of American intellectual life), such German-influenced ideas as the idea of a historical theodicy.

We may find it hard to see the extent to which such ideas became fashionable and influential in American theological thought because German influences were partly effaced in the wake of the World Wars. But the history of American religion would look very different had the German-American intellectual exchange been less extended and intense than it was. Further, since religion was, as Noll (2006, 11) points out, the locus of America culture until the late nineteenth century, the history of American arts and letters would look very different, too. *The Shadow of God*, by resisting the tendency to isolate religion, literature, history, and philosophy into discrete disciplines—an artificial division that makes it hard to understand the comprehensive aspirations of the German Idealists—provides us with a model for the flexible and broad-minded way of approaching the study of American political and theological thought. We might, further, extend this breadth by following Rosen in bringing analytic and Continental philosophy into greater conversation with one another.

Theodicy and Secularization

While Theodor Parker might seem like a mere antiquarian footnote in the history of the reception of German Idealist thought, his own influence rescues a focus on him from mere antiquarianism—indeed, from

mere academicism, too. The long afterlife of his conception of the “arc of history” can help us make sense of our predicament today.

In a general sense, the rhetoric of historical destiny remains familiar. It may be familiar to many from Obama’s fondness for King’s paraphrase of Parker, but George W. Bush (2005) offered a similar formulation in his second inaugural address in proclaiming that “history has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty.” As should be clear, despite Parker’s relatively minor intellectual stature today, he articulated themes that became staples of American civil religion, becoming recurrent themes in political life.

The once broadly inclusive civil religion has, since the election of Donald Trump, become more polarized and more secular. Trump’s rhetoric of “American carnage” defied the reassuring tropes of the arc of history. Now concentrated among self-proclaimed progressives, appeals to historical justification have become more partisan than they were a generation ago. The long arc “arc of history,” devoutly hoped for amidst the turmoil of contemporary events but never a certainty, has become the predetermined “right side of history.”

Thus, for example, in the recent Supreme Court decision sharply limiting consideration of race in college admissions, in her dissent, Justice Sotomayor concluded that “‘the arc of the moral universe’ will bend toward racial justice despite the Court’s efforts today to impede its progress.”³ Without mentioning Parker, his sentiment and even his language is still visible. But there has been a crucial change: the disappearance of God. Sotomayor expresses confidence that she knows the course of human events. But she makes no mention of an agent capable of steering it through the shoals of human corruption. History now appears to be self-regulating, even automatic in its operation. Theodicy has been replaced by cliodicy: named for the Greek muse of history (Clio), a cliodicy sees history as a source of intelligibility and justice.

This substitution is a more significant change than those who turn to a cliodicy seem to recognize. For example, while Sotomayor cites (in a footnote) the refrain of King’s speech, which serves as its published title—“Our God is Marching On”—she pays little attention to the content. King’s refrain is not idiosyncratic; his title is a reference to The Battle Hymn of the Republic, composed by Howe and thus inspired, to some degree, by Parker. If secularization means, as Carl Schmitt (2010, 2) suggested, the retention of religious terms, concepts, and arguments that are, however, removed from their original context

and applied to different problems, then it would be hard to imagine a more perfect example.⁴

Does the religious music survive transposition? I confess that I do not think so. Parker's theodicy may be Socratic, but it is still religious. And it makes little sense in the absence of belief—or as Parker preferred to put, feeling—that we are subject to benevolent, omnipotent guidance. It is not the fault of Sotomayor—or anyone else—if they do not experience that feeling. In that case, however, they are not entitled to share in the gifts of the spirit, that is, in the conviction that history tends towards justice.

What about the evidence of history itself? The notorious problem with inferring what ought to be from what has been is that it implies that justice is necessarily on the side of the winners. If they had not been right, after all, they would not have acquired the might necessary to prevail in the long term. The tendency to conflate justice with success was sufficiently disturbing to Lincoln that he felt compelled to remind fellow Unionists that the Civil War was a scourge on their own sins, not a vindication of their morality. The “arc of history” is not supposed to be a guarantee either of moral certainty or of inevitable victory.

Yearning for a degree of coherence that we neither experience nor prove is part of what Weber meant by disenchantment. For all our insistence that we know where history is going and what we must do to get right with it, it is also the dominant mood of American politics in the twenty-first century. Torn between decline in religious belief and affiliation and dependence on the moral and political goods that churches and their teachings once sustained, the challenge of reconciliation remains accessible to us even in the conceptual vocabulary of Parker and the German Idealists from whom he learned much has become archaic. We are still caught in the shadow of God.

NOTES

1. Rosen (2022, 45) argues not simply that religions can be rational or Socratic, but that Socratism is, itself, “religious.”
2. “Oval Office Redesigned,” <https://www.nbcwashington.com/local/oval-office-redesigned/1877556/>
3. *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/20-1199_l6gn.pdf
4. Rosen (2022, 4–5) distinguishes his own Nietzschean image of “the shadow of God” from Schmittian secularization on the grounds that the latter indicates discontinuity as well as continuity. This difference does not seem very great to me. As

with Nietzsche's critique of modern science, the overall argument of *Political Theology* is precisely that modern adaptations of religious concepts make no sense because they are stripped of their original meaning and removed from their original context. True, Schmitt hints that we might be able to return to the original meaning by embracing religious faith, whereas Nietzsche sees this as impossible for any honest person. Despite his professions of Catholic piety, however, it is doubtful that Schmitt took this step himself and it is simply unclear whether he regarded it as a serious option for others.

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