

## **The American Appropriation of God in Select Foundational Documents of the United States**

*Joaquin Trujillo*

The Declaration of Independence, Gettysburg Address, and Second Inaugural Address lay the foundation of American identity. These documents tell us what it means *to be* American. The “national political values and beliefs” they signify form the basis of the American Creed: the body of political, economic, and religious ideas that define American identity, unify Americans as a nation, and have been “broadly supported by most elements in American society” since the late eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The Declaration and Addresses identify equality, freedom, and self-governance as the basic principles on which the American nation stands. They tell us *being* American means genuinely living these ideals. The Declaration conceived the American nation when it defined Americans as “one people” who distinguish themselves in the belief that “all men are created equal;” possess the “unalienable Right” to “Life,” “Liberty, and “the pursuit of Happiness;” and, to “secure these rights,” live by a government that draws its “powers from the consent of the governed.” The Addresses—taken together here as a single treatise rather than separate political statements—recontract American society “on the basis of the Declaration.”<sup>2</sup> They resolve American governance to the Declaration’s definition of Americans as a nation “of the people, by the people, for the people,” “conceived in Liberty,” and “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

The power of the Declaration and Addresses to forge identity rests heavily on the validation of the human principles they advocate. They legitimate equality, freedom, and self-governance vis-à-vis God, and through that reference invest America with “spiritual purpose” and the sense that American history is the “consummation of all history.” The Declaration reveres a God who created everyone as equal, bestows upon them the unalienable right to pursue “Life,”

---

<sup>1</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1978), xiv.

“Liberty,” and “Happiness,” and entitles them to a “separate and equal station” in life. The Addresses describe the American nation and the ideals that define it as “under God.” Both texts proclaim freedom, equality, and self-governance as righteous. They suggest these ideals as God’s way of being in man, and imply they are worth both living and dying for.

The Declaration and Addresses may both legitimate American identity vis-à-vis God, but they appropriate him differently. The Declaration venerates a God of personal opportunity who serves the individual’s freedom-, power- and potential to-be. It lays out a World defined by the right of individuals “to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station which the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God entitle them.” Its God admonishes Americans to freely accomplish themselves and grants them the “protection of Divine Providence” to fulfill their individuality. The Declaration posits self-achievement (and not God) as the measure of human reality. The primary responsibility it indicates Americans have to God is to individually realize themselves. It assigns God the task of helping Americans freely and meaningfully fulfill themselves.

The Addresses reverse the Declaration’s notion that individual purpose takes precedence over God’s will. They replace the idea of “a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence” with the notion that “the Almighty has his own purposes.” The Addresses view God’s will as impenetrable and immutable, identify it as the moral fiber and structure of reality, and say Americans must “struggle” to comprehend and obey it if they are to “live” and “endure.” This God actively impacts American reality. He judges, rewards, and punishes Americans over and against their obedience to his will. All Americans can do is “fondly” hope and “fervently” pray for “firmness in the right” in accordance with the power God gives them “to see the right.” Americans “perish” when they fail to obey God faithfully. The God of the Addresses does not entitle Americans to equality, freedom, and self-governance. He allows these meanings to come to pass in American life. Whereas the Declaration views Americans as a people who suffer when they fail themselves, the Addresses view them as a people who suffer when they fail God.

## Views and Method

Historians commonly source the Declaration’s underlying philosophy to the Christian faith of the founders, including, of course, Thomas Jefferson. They explain that the ideals Jefferson expressed in the Declaration were “intimately and vitally connected” to the founders’ views of “God and Nature.”<sup>3</sup> Historians also generally agree that the founders assumed God’s providence, believed they knew God’s purpose, and felt they possessed the power to comprehend and

---

<sup>3</sup> John Dewey, “The Moral Faith of the Declaration,” in *A Casebook on the Declaration of Independence: Analysis of the Structure, Meaning, and Literary Worth of the Text*, ed. Robert Ginsberg (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967), 163; John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution: The Faith of the Founding Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987); David L. Holmes, *The Faith of the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

control a world that God bestowed to them to live their freedom. The founders did not posit the world (i.e., nature) as a place where God resides, governs, and his will immanently acts upon daily life. They viewed it as an “intermediary” between “man and God” and a place God created for people to genuinely accomplish themselves.<sup>4</sup> The founders believed that their ideals were “imprescriptible” and “best suited for all mankind” because they were “prescribed by the law of nature and the will of God.”<sup>5</sup>

Historians make a similar argument for the Addresses. They often highlight the Old Testament (OT) character of Abraham Lincoln’s religious views and political thinking, and see the Addresses as an embodiment of his faith.<sup>6</sup> They say Lincoln believed that human reality was contingent on a God who played an active role in history, whose purpose and judgment were inscrutable, and whose aims for us were different than our own.<sup>7</sup> For example, Wolf writes that Lincoln saw “the whole sweep of the nation’s history in terms of God’s judgments and mercies;” understood “the nation’s history in a continuity of purpose with the acts of God as interpreted by the biblical prophets;” believed “he stood under the living God of history;” and submitted everything (including himself) “to higher judgment.”<sup>8</sup> The thinking Lincoln expresses in his writings, Wolf adds, confesses the belief in “the utter dependence of man upon God” and the idea that on every level God is God and man remains man.<sup>9</sup>

This essay applies hermeneutic-phenomenology—the rigorous, unbiased interpretation of *human* meaning manifested through language—to render: (1) the distinct ways the Declaration and Addresses appropriate God; and (2) their signification of God, the self, and the other within American existence. It reads these documents from the perspective that their meaning (their interpretive content and comprehension of being) is not encapsulated within their historical, cultural, or personal circumstances. Their basic significance transcends the personal beliefs and intentions of their authors through the “miracle” we call

---

<sup>4</sup> Carl L. Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1942), 36-7.

<sup>5</sup> Carl L. Becker, *Freedom and Responsibility in the American Way of Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald C. White, “Lincoln’s Sermon on the Mount: The Second Inaugural,” in *Religion and the American Civil War*, eds. Randall M. Hiller, Harry S. Tout, and Charles Reagan Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Reinhold Nieburh, “The Religion of Abraham Lincoln,” in *Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address: Commemorative Papers*, ed. Allan Nevins (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964); Hans J. Morgenthau, “The Mind of Abraham Lincoln,” in *Essays on Lincoln’s Faith and Politics*, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983); Elton Trueblood, *Abraham Lincoln: Theologian of American Anguish* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973); William J. Wolf, *The Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1963).

<sup>7</sup> Allen C. Guelzo, “Abraham Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity,” *Journal of Abraham Lincoln Association* 18, no. 1 (2008); David Hein, “Lincoln’s Theology and Political Ethics,” in *Essays on Lincoln’s Faith and Politics*, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Wolf, *The Religion of Abraham Lincoln*, 25, 59, 186.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

language: the event where we overcome “the radical noncommunicability of the lived experience” and the originator’s “experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public.”<sup>10</sup> We can access the human significance of these texts (the comprehension of being they manifest) because people share an equality of *being* (as *being-with*) whose essence is *logos*. Existence for each and every one of us is shaped by *logos*. We *are* the power to render the meaning of things (their being) under the light of comprehension and communicate it through words.<sup>11</sup>

The enduring significance and universal appeal of the Declaration and Addresses lie more in the basic human meaning the texts convey than in the personal experiences or political beliefs of their authors. Their meaning sits at a near zero-order level of abstraction that signifies fundamental ways people come to pass as World (existence) and whose content transcends the personal intentions of their originators. The meaning of the Declaration and Addresses is noteworthy in its detachment from the individuals who authored the documents. These texts are more about the primary ways people encounter themselves, each other, and God (viz., the appropriation of human reality) than they are about the personal views and beliefs of their authors. Reading them phenomenologically lets their meaning (their truth) manifest itself more freely within the hermeneutic (interpretive) circle of understanding where at the same time we heuristically give way to a closer approximation of their truth (we come closer to the center of the understanding they yield) we enrich our comprehension of who we are in the midst of being-in-the-world.<sup>12</sup>

Five sections follow these opening remarks. The first section baselines the main analysis by summarizing and contrasting OT and Pauline notions of faith. The second part describes existential parallels in the Declaration and Paul’s interpretation of the self, God, and the relationship between these beings; the third section describes the meaning the Declaration assigns to the other. The fourth section renders the parallels between the faiths expressed by the Addresses and the OT, describes the meaning of the self, the other, and God projected by these documents, and examines the relationship they propose between Americans and God. Part five concludes with reflections on American receptiveness to the faiths the Declaration and Addresses embody and the originary significance of God to American identity.

---

<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: The Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 15-6.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 56; W. J. Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), 491-5; George Kovacs, *The Question of God in Heidegger’s Phenomenology*, ed. James M. Edie, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 84.

<sup>12</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), 231; Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 194.

## Two Faiths

The law, obedience, salvation, sin, and God's wrath "form an indissoluble unity" that is integrally "bound up with the whole message of the OT."<sup>13</sup> The OT correlates faith in God with obedience to his law (both ritual and ethical).<sup>14</sup> It reads that God is the "Judge of all the earth" who always does what is "right" (Gen 28:25); "he is the Rock, his work is perfect," and "all his ways are judgment" (Deut 32:4); the faithful must keep God's "commandments," "walk in his ways," and "fear him" so they "may live," all "may be well" with them, and they may "prolong" their "days" (Deut 5:33, 8:6), and; they must obey the law to live a "long life" before God and earn their "salvation" (Psa 91:16). The correlation the OT makes between faith and obedience—the fact that it posits these moments as synonymous—inclines the faithful (ideally speaking) to face the law in the same way they face nature (Jer 8:7), viz., as an integral and inescapable part of daily life. The OT embodies the notion that the faithful beckon God's wrath (here and now) when they transgress the law. Essential to their encounter with everyday life is the idea that God's anger consumes and troubles the sinful; it burns upon them (Psa 90:7; Jer 15:14).

At the same time the OT centers God and the law within human reality, however, it prescribes limits to the comprehension of his ways and judgment. The OT views the presumption of these events as sinful, and, as a consequence, leaves the faithful in the position where they can never know if their obedience to the law will fulfill their hopes for salvation. This opposition between the imperative to obey and the prohibition to comprehend disposes the faithful toward "theological apprehension" over their fate.<sup>15</sup> It leaves them unsure about their chances to be with God. The OT faithful live with the inescapable uncertainty over whether personal merit will suffice "to receive the blessing of salvation" or it "will turn out in the end that God's legal claim can simply never be fully met."<sup>16</sup>

Paul answers the OT anxiety over salvation, sin, and death by turning its idea of faith on its head and offering the faithful "the possibility of a new life through forgiveness."<sup>17</sup> Paul contends that the demand to fulfill the law

---

<sup>13</sup> H. Kleinknecht, J. Fichtner, and G. Stahlin, *Wrath*, trans. Dorothea M. Barton, Bible Key Words from Gerhard Kittel's Theologisches Wörterbuch Zum Neuen Testament (Adam & Charles Black, 1964), 48; Gottfried Quell et al., *Sin*, trans. J.R. Coates, Bible Key Words from Gerhard Kittel's Theologisches Wörterbuch Zum Neuen Testament (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1951), 41.

<sup>14</sup> Rudolf Bultmann and Artur Weiser, *Faith*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Dorothea M. Barton, Theologisches Wörterbuch Zum Neuen Testament (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1961), 47-8.

<sup>15</sup> Gottfried Quell and Gottlob Schrenk, *Righteousness*, trans. J.R. Coates (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1951), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, *Hope*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Dorothea M. Barton and P.R. Ackroyd, Theologisches Wörterbuch Zum Neuen Testament (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1963), 23-4.

<sup>17</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, "Romans 7 and the Anthropology of Paul," in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. Schubert M. Ogden (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961), 152.

ultimately alienates the faithful from righteousness and salvation. Righteousness and salvation are not merited before the law. They are “utterly the gift of God.”<sup>18</sup> Paul reasons that since we cannot escape sin—all “come short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23)—hinging salvation on the law enhances the power of sin and death. Belief in the law makes sin sharper because the law identifies sin as such, never reveals that we are inherently fallible and cannot escape sin, but still demands complete obedience to its tenets. Death becomes more frightening because the divine imperative to fulfill the law continually throws salvation into doubt (Ezek 18:4; 1 Cor 15:50-56). Paul then replaces the impossibility of redemption through faith in the law with its realization in faith as such. He says God’s eschatological judgment passed in the *kerygma* (the death, resurrection, and message of Christ), contends that God unconditionally pronounces us righteous through faith in Christ, and replaces the law with the *kerygma* as the centerpiece of faith (Rom 3:22; Gal 2:16).

Paul proposes faith in Christ “as the only possibility of being declared righteous by God.”<sup>19</sup> Its reason, he states, is to redeem “us from the curse of the law” (Gal 3:13) so that “the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us” (Rom 8:4) and we may “abide with God” (Col 3:17, 7:20). Paul converts the law from the aim of faith to its instrument. He states its purpose is to prepare the faithful for the *kerygma* as the path to righteousness and salvation; it is “our schoolmaster to bring us into Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal 3:23-24). Paul asserts that the intention of the law is to show the faithful they cannot escape sin and must throw themselves before the “promise” of Christ. Paul frees the faithful from their anxiety over salvation, sin, and death by resting righteousness and salvation on the belief in Christ rather than fulfillment of the law.

### **The Declaration and Paul**

The Declaration and Paul posit isomorphic interpretations of the self and God whose structure rests on an affirmation of the future-dimensionality of existence and a commitment to liberating existentiality (the immanent will towards meaning and meaningfulness). They re-collect and re-solve themselves to liberating the inherent dynamism that drives human existence and the task given with that power to freely accomplish itself. Freeing the drive towards meaningfulness is the basic motivation behind these writings, and an intention that likely emerged in response to institutionalizations their authors faced that constrained their freedom. The Declaration stood against British attempts to alienate Americans from their ability to freely accomplish themselves politically, economically, and personally. Paul stood against oppositions within the OT system of faith that alienated the faithful from their ability to freely achieve

---

<sup>18</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, “Paul,” in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. Schubert M. Ogden (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961), 168.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, trans. Norman P. Goldhawk (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1951), 54, 56.

righteousness and salvation. The idea that human existence carries within itself the impulse and prerogative to freely and meaningfully realize itself (to accomplish itself as its own possibilities and future) is the basic message behind these texts. The Declaration expresses this significance as the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Paul expresses it as the right to righteousness and salvation.

The Declaration and Paul's interpretation of the self and God vector analogously from their presumptive affirmation of human being as the freedom-, power-, and potential-to-be. The affirmation of this dynamism sets the foundation and course of their interpretation of the self, God, and the relationship they propose between these beings. The Declaration and Paul indicate human being as the potential-to-be-with-God, correlate personal and ultimate meaningfulness (self-achievement before God), and maintain God's unequivocal support for the expression and realization of individuality. The Declaration designates life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as rightful and righteous. They are "rights" that are "sacred," "self-evident," "unalienable," and "endowed" by the "Creator." It suggests ideals that are intrinsic to human being and ontologically culminate in the liberation of existentiality as God's way of being in man. It indicates that people genuinely realize themselves before God when they aspire toward these ideals, and projects them as a pathway to personal and ultimate meaningfulness. People meaningfully free themselves in the light of God's presence when they willfully live these notions. They draw nearer to God when they will themselves toward life, liberty, and happiness because these intentional acts contain within them the possibility of fulfilling God's purpose for human existence. The Declaration contends that self-governance among equals committed to freeing their existentiality offers them the best chance of living life as God intends them to live it.

Intimate to the idea that God's intention for human being is that it fulfill itself is the idea that God supports self-achievement. The second notion is implicit in the first, and integral to the claim that people possess the "sacred" and "unalienable" right "to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them." When the Declaration signifies this right as given with the world that God created to aid self-achievement, it assumes divine providence for the expression and realization of existentiality. Intrinsic to the Declaration's appropriation of the self is its appropriation of God as the Ultimate Being who applauds and assists the free pursuit of personal meaningfulness.

The correlation Paul makes between personal and ultimate meaningfulness when he assumes righteousness and salvation as the final aim of human existence is typical to OT thought, which puts God at the center of human reality and daily life. Personal and ultimate meaningfulness were more singular in their meaning during Paul's era than they were during the period of the Declaration. The Declaration leaned toward a compartmentalization of personal and ultimate meaningfulness as part of the broader historical progression toward the rationalization of human reality. Where Paul begins to diverge from the OT

notion of existence is when he shifts its interpretation of human being from the possibility-of-being-with-God to the potential-to-be-with-God. He eliminates doubts over righteousness and salvation by projecting these moments as entitlements waiting to be realized. Paul opens the way for the faithful to enter into righteousness and salvation through the understanding that, “if God be for us, who can be against us” (Rom 8:31). His interpretation of divine grace changes faith from a longing into the future to an assurance in the future (*προσδεξόμενοι*) “combined with a rightful claim to it” (*ἐπιζήσαντες*).<sup>20</sup>

Paul appropriates the future of the faithful as an event simultaneously structured by the invitation and power to enter into God’s grace. He dissolves the doubt the OT casts on existence by demoting the law’s ontological status and guaranteeing righteousness and salvation through faith in Christ. Paul posits faith in Christ as the catalyst that frees one to receive God’s gift of righteousness and salvation. Faith in Christ gives way to “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom 10:4). The suggestion that God supports personal and ultimate meaningfulness is implicit to the notion that he gave us the *kerygma* so we can freely live in his grace. Righteousness and salvation are not achieved in the way they are earned in the OT through ethical and ritual labor under the law, but by embracing an event that is already-there waiting to be actualized by a decision to believe in the *kerygma*. The decision to accept the invitation to righteousness and salvation is all that God requires of the faithful to receive the entitlements of their faith. The correlation between personal and ultimate meaningfulness combined with the significance of the *kerygma* as the path to these moments culminate in the message that God mercifully and compassionately advocates self-achievement.

The basic correspondences rendered from the Declaration and Paul thus far—the interpretation of existence as the potential-to-be-with-God, the correlation of personal and ultimate meaningfulness, and the idea that God supports self-achievement—suggest an inclination in these texts to idolize the self and instrumentalize God. The idolization of the self and the instrumentalization of God are codependent in their meaning. They emerge in the Declaration and Paul as two sides of the same intentional act that signifies personal and ultimate meaningfulness as God’s priority. The Declaration admonishes the individual to affirm the self-advancing, self-promoting ideals of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and legitimates them by referencing them to God. By correlating the realization of these ideals with ultimate meaningfulness, by identifying meanings that free existentiality as righteous, the Declaration implies that God serves individuality. The Declaration calls life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness the ideals people should be to meaningfully achieve themselves before God. It implies that God created the world so people can leverage it to be who he intends them to be (sc., their potentiality). It also suggests that our duty to God is to freely achieve ourselves. The World the Declaration projects centers on the self, and not God. The meaning of God in the

---

<sup>20</sup> Bultmann and Rengstorf, *Hope*, 21.

Declaration is secondary to its signification of the self. The Declaration appropriates God as a being who graces the free pursuit of personal meaningfulness and supports self-accomplishment.

The primary emphasis in Paul's writings is personal salvation. It is not God. Like the Declaration, his appropriation of God implies the idolization of the self and the instrumentalization of God. Paul structures his interpretation of human reality around the idea of God but leans its architecture toward personal fulfillment. At the same time Paul designates a new "mode of existence" where the faithful stand free to achieve themselves before God through faith in Christ,<sup>21</sup> he projects God as a means to righteousness and salvation. Paul keeps God at the center of human reality—he is "of whom are all things" (Col 8:4)—but assigns him the task of compassionately and mercifully helping us live in his grace. Paul's thesis is that God—through his "righteousness" and "forbearance"—set forth Christ to serve as "a propitiation through faith in his blood" to free the faithful to be righteous (Rom 3:25). The weight of this claim is not on the faithful's obligation to God, but on God's sacrifice and promise to the faithful. God demonstrated "his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ [his Son] died for us" (Rom 5:8). God assumed the task to free the faithful for righteousness and salvation out of his compassion and mercy. There is no other reason behind him accepting this task except that he wants the faithful to achieve themselves personally and ultimately because he (or maybe Paul) wants it. The only thing God requires of individuals is their decision to embrace an idea (the *kerygma*) that promotes their self-fulfillment.

### **The Meaning of the Other in the Declaration**

The Declaration's interpretation of the other (the relationship it projects between the self and the other) is structured by its interpretation of God. This correspondence makes sense given what we have learned from Buber's reflections on the *Thou*. Buber reveals the deep correlation between the way the self meets God and the other.<sup>22</sup> He shows us that when the self objectifies one of these beings it tends to objectify the other one and forgets the presence it shares with both of them. The Declaration follows the same trajectory. It views the other as it views God: an object of personal intent. The relevance the Declaration assigns to community, governance, and the other is always in relation to the greater importance it assigns to the self. The Declaration may destine Americans for society<sup>23</sup> and point to God as the source of the world's meaning,<sup>24</sup> but its focus and priority is the self. Within the overriding emphasis it places on personal fulfillment is the inclination to signify the other as a means to realize

---

<sup>21</sup> Bultmann, "Paul," 144.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, Second ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 99, 115.

<sup>23</sup> Dewey, "The Moral Faith of the Declaration," 163.

<sup>24</sup> Forrest Church, *The American Creed: A Biography of the Declaration of Independence* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002), 37.

existentiality. At the same time the Declaration instrumentalizes God to self-achievement, it forgets the equiprimordiality of the other, contracts his meaning in all his future, power, and potentiality, and transforms him into an object of personal intent and a means for individual fulfillment.

The views the founders expressed about politics and economics evidence the observation that the Declaration idolizes the self and objectifies the other to existentiality. The founders held a “mercantile” view of life based on the premise that people were driven by “rapacious self-interest.” Their goal was not to create a government that insured that people were equally happy, but, as Jefferson stated in his First Inaugural Address, to restrain people from injuring each other and leave “them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement.”<sup>25</sup> The Declaration gives no indication that it views happiness any differently. The phenomenological observation that personal authenticity is contingent on genuine concern for the other is absent in the Declaration. It does not suggest that personal happiness depends on the self-actualization of the other or people have to share happiness equally to realize it individually. The Declaration leaves everyone to their own means and power to accomplish themselves. Its appropriation of the other like its appropriation of God is fundamentally pragmatic. It objectifies both to the expression and realization of individual potentiality.

The attempt of Southern thinkers during the American Civil War to leverage the Declaration’s prioritization of the self to advocate slavery further evidences the document’s signification of the other. Their writings—a reflection of the characteristic tendency of Southern nineteenth-century culture to jealously guard its “intense individualism”<sup>26</sup>—show us that when a person holds nothing else above himself (including God) but himself, he can legitimate just about anything for himself. For example, Calhoun’s essay, “The Most False and Dangerous of All Political Errors,” employs a series of equivocations that speciously leverage the Declaration’s notion of equality to try to systematically conclude that all men are not inherently “free and equal.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in his 1858 debates against Lincoln, Douglas points to the historical reality the Declaration’s authors faced rather than the ideals they strove to realize to argue that the Declaration does not designate “the negro equal to the white man.”<sup>28</sup> These writings testify to the phenomenological observation that the inordinate concern with self-actualization deflects attention from the primordial fact that people coexist, share an equality of being, and tend to depersonalize the other when they idolize the self.

---

<sup>25</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition: And the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1948), 16, 38.

<sup>26</sup> W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 31, 33.

<sup>27</sup> John C. Calhoun, “The Most False and Dangerous of Political Errors,” in *A Casebook on the Declaration of Independence: Analysis of the Structure, Meaning, and Literary Worth of the Text*, ed. Robert Ginsberg (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967), 57.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen A. Douglas, “Created Equal?,” *ibid.*, 61.

## The Addresses and the Old Testament

The Addresses project the OT notion of faith. They put the American nation squarely “under God” and revere an Ultimate One whose centrality overshadows personal interests, directly impacts personal presence, and monopolizes individual fate.<sup>29</sup> The Addresses signify an inescapable tension between American and God’s will. They project the latter as the measure of American existence, and indicate that Americans suffer God’s wrath and “perish” when they disobey him. The God of the Addresses grows hot with anger and smites Americans for “wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces” (an allusion to Gen 3:19). References to Matthew, the gospel recognized for its Jewish-Christian content and fundamental affirmation of the law,<sup>30</sup> testify to the OT tension that characterizes the Addresses. When the Addresses cite Matt 18:7—“woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh”—and Matt 7:1—“but let us judge not, that we be not judged”—they appeal to the OT connection between hope, obedience, and judgment. This appeal is repeated in references to Gen 9:6 and Psa 19:9 in the simile of the bondsman, lash, and sword.

Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

The Addresses do not convey Paul’s certainty in God’s grace nor do they assign him the task of serving individual intent. They are void of the Declaration’s suggestion that “the infinite mind of God and the finite mind of man” are “one and the same thing,”<sup>31</sup> and revere the “living God” of the OT whose intention lies beyond the power of human reason—“far above our poor power to add or detract.” Faith in this God begins “where thinking leaves off.”<sup>32</sup> The Addresses project the OT interpretation of God’s will as an inscrutable, active, and sometimes demonic force intent on achieving a moral and historical purpose.<sup>33</sup> Their faith does not entitle Americans to righteousness or knowledge of God’s purpose. It exhorts Americans to faithfully obey God, challenges the

---

<sup>29</sup> Bultmann and Weiser, *Faith*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14.

<sup>31</sup> Becker, *The Declaration of Independence*, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 61.

<sup>33</sup> Eduard Schweizer, *The Spirit of God*, trans. A.E. Harvey, Bible Key Words from Gerhard Kittel’s *Theologisches Wörterbuch Zum Neuen Testament* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1960),

American claim to righteousness, and recognizes that Americans hazard catastrophic failure despite their faith.

The Addresses assume the Declaration's commitment to equality, freedom, and self-governance, but do not sanctify these ideals as Americans' highest purpose. They do not idolize the self. Instead, they objectify all Americans—the self and the other—before God. Whereas the Declaration posits a World structured around self-actualization, puts God at the service of personal fulfillment, and objectifies God and the other vis-à-vis the self, the Addresses project World-structure around God, subject personal intent to God's will, and equally objectify the self and other before him. The objectification of all Americans before God does not mean that the Addresses depersonalize the self or the other. On the contrary, it projects all Americans to be equal in their humanity before God. The Addresses put all Americans on a level ontological landscape that signifies them equal in their being before themselves, each other, and God. Personal fulfillment in this context is not achieved individually, but mutually, because all Americans are equally subject to God's judgment and must abide by his law.

The Addresses signify obedience to God as the purpose and reason of American reality. They view God as the only certainty and convey the OT sense that “man is nothing but a ‘sojourner’ in his midst.”<sup>34</sup> The Addresses identify God's will as the imperative that governs American life, suggest that Americans achieve themselves as Americans when they fulfill God's purpose for them, and, moreover, state that they meet that purpose more as a nation than as individuals. They speak to Americans as the OT spoke to the Israelites: a “nation” defined by its service and submission to God. Americans face God's judgment together as a “people.” Only when Americans revere and obey God in their death do the Addresses underscore their individuality. The Addresses eulogize those “honored dead” who “gave the last full measure of devotion” to fulfill God's purpose for Americans, “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

## Conclusion

Americans historically have proven more receptive to the faith of the Declaration than that of the Addresses. It is easier and more natural for Americans to revere the Pauline God of the Declaration than the OT God of the Addresses. The Declaration's faith gears naturally into human existence as the given power and task to achieve itself. It reveres a God of mercy, forgiveness, and compassion who sacrificed his only Son so that we may live in God's grace. Faith in this God facilitates the expression and realization of existentiality more than it constrains or regulates it. The Declaration signifies God as an Ultimate Being who graces

---

<sup>34</sup> Martin Buber, “The Man of Today and the Jewish Bible,” in *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies by Martin Buber*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 3.

the American pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness, assigns God the task of helping Americans achieve these meanings, and indicates that it is the responsibility of Americans to God to realize them.

Another reason American existence has been more receptive to the Declaration's faith is because its interpretation of God accommodates capitalist notions constitutional to American identity. The commitment to competitive capitalism is intrinsic to the American Creed. Americans historically have linked life, liberty, and happiness to prosperity, prosperity to property, and ownership of property to free markets. Americans, indeed people in general, rely on property to achieve themselves. People depend on things to be; they rely on them to accomplish themselves. The essence of existence may be ontological, but its basis—the start and end points of finite transcendence—is ontic. Because economy subsumes a good part of the things that comprise World, a person's place in it (his class) helps determine his chances of achieving himself.<sup>35</sup> A person's ability to control his destiny (realize the future he is and projects) typically depends on his power to control the things that are important to him, and this usually means owning them. The Declaration spontaneously encourages capitalism when it prioritizes the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness, because people typically must dominate things to be and many of the most important things they depend on pertain to the market and their ability to freely control them. These observations do not suggest that the Declaration venerates a capitalistic God. They only suggest that the document's faith encourages capitalistic tendencies integral to American identity in the context of a World whose architecture is substantially contingent on the structure of economy.

The Addresses contraindicate the Declaration's faith. They revere the OT God of personal responsibility. This is the God of obedience and judgment who commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son to achieve God's grace. The Addresses project a World where God's will, rather than individual potentiality, is the human imperative. American life in this World hinges on obedience to God regardless of the potentialities that define and drive existence. Not only do Americans suffer when they fail the God of the Addresses, obeying his will often opposes who they spontaneously are and want to be. This God will rightfully demand Americans to deny themselves in reverence to him. Faith in him precludes the prioritization of the self and indicates the realization of personal meaningfulness as contingent on God's will. It also contradicts several of the core political-economic views that inspire American identity and, because of the constraints it puts on American existence, appears to have inclined Americans away from assuming its significance in their everyday political life. To the extent that Americans may turn to the faith of the Addresses they likely would do so only when the formulas defining them fail to achieve their intended goals in the face of deep national ambiguity or crisis. The American Civil War exemplifies this point. American receptiveness to the faith of the Addresses surfaced during a

---

<sup>35</sup> Max Weber, "Class, Status, Party," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 161.

meltdown in American ideals and institutions that led to a four-year conflict, resulted in over 600,000 casualties, and almost dissolved the country.

Revealing the faith of the Addresses is easier than rendering it from the Declaration. The connection between the Addresses and the OT is fairly linear. Lincoln appeared to reach into the OT to embrace a faith that helped him make sense of the ambiguities and contradictions that drove the American Civil War. Through that faith he consigned the reason of the war to an ultimate, inscrutable, and just authority. From that faith he drew the hope he needed to manage his presidency through the moral contradictions that divided Americans and face the near incomprehensible demand of situating them against each other. Lincoln's response to a clergyman who expressed to him the hope that God was on the side of the Union demonstrates to the OT character of Lincoln's faith. Lincoln disagreed with the clergyman, then replied, "I am not at all concerned about that, for I know that the Lord is *always* on the side of the *right*. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that *I* and *this nation* should be on the Lord's side."<sup>36</sup>

It is tough to identify a linear relationship between the Declaration and Paul that tenably links their faiths. What we can see, however, are meaningful parallels between their interpretations of God and human existence. We also know that the founders were Christian and their views of man, nature, and God were influenced by their faith. It may be more accurate, then, to describe the Declaration as a mark along the evolution of the Christian comprehension of being than a direct outcome of Christian faith. The faith of the Declaration appears to be a political availability into which Paul's theology evolved. The founders likely were the basic elements of Paul's theology that persisted through the development of Christianity more than they reflectively believed in Paul's faith. Projecting a linear relation between the faiths of Paul and the Declaration would probably represent a retrojection of specious significance into the meaning of the latter.

Despite the different ways the Declaration and Addresses appropriate God, they equally suggest his importance to American identity. The notion that God graces equality, freedom, and self-governance moors American existence to a transcendental and ultimate meaning. It universalizes and legitimates the ideals that comprise the American Creed and wraps them into a unity that congeals and propels American identity. Divorced of their reference to God, these principles would be little more than ideology and lack the emotive power requisite to sustainably build identity and nation across many of the ethnic and cultural differences that distinguish Americans from one another and often divide them. In this regard, the assertion that the Declaration's use of "religious words and images" is "idolatrous" and "at odds with the values of the Revolution"<sup>37</sup> may be "correct" from the perspective of contemporary American political-culture, but it is incorrect when we assess it phenomenologically. The Declaration and the

---

<sup>36</sup> Wolf, *The Religion of Abraham Lincoln*, 128.

<sup>37</sup> Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), xix.

Addresses are political responses to the truth of human existence, the radical ambiguities that penetrate it, and the ontic and ontologically demands that incessantly challenge it. One of the reasons these foundational documents appeal to God to support their assertions about human reality is because that petition is given with existence. The radical limits immanent to human being, the fact that there is something rather than nothing, and the marvel of the *being*-event suggest the possibility of God as the wholly Other. Although legitimating the ideals that define American identity by appealing to commonsense notions of right and wrong is an option open to Americans and one they are increasingly exercising, it does not give them the sense of sacredness or “messianic” self-awareness that historically has fueled their unity, propelled them to overcome the obstacles that have challenged their evolution as a nation, and driven them to “redeem” themselves “in blood.”<sup>38</sup> As much as contemporary American culture and politics may increasingly advocate atheism or secularism, the suggestion of God remains integral to American identity. It is a foundational meaning that stands, often anonymously, on the horizon of American everyday life.

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., xx.