

## **Ambiguously Articulating “Americanism” The Rhetoric of Hiram Wesley Evans and the Klan of the 1920s**

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**Keywords:** Hiram Wesley Evans; Ku Klux Klan; Americanism; Strategic Ambiguity; American Civil Religion; Organizational Rhetoric

*Historian Richard Hofstadter once described an essay by Imperial Wizard Hiram Wesley Evans as “not immoderate in tone.” Evans oriented that essay in the defense of Americanism, a frequent theme in his writing. Among the central tenets of Evans’s Americanism was a devotion to Protestantism. It was in the religious fulfillment of Protestantism, Evans would suggest that American values could be fully recognized, predominantly the American concern with individualism. In this essay, I argue that Evan’s ambiguously defined his notion of Americanism by making substantial efforts to associate his organization’s goals with the American civil religious tradition. Evans’s strategically ambiguous rhetoric portrayed a unified, moral and political vision for American life that served the Klan throughout the 1920s, but ultimately undermined the virtues that the civil religious tradition was initially intended to maintain.*

While mention of the Ku Klux Klan conjures images of right-wing political extremism, the Klan of the 1920s was a social, political, and cultural force with which to be reckoned. The organization defied any simple extremist classification (MacLean, 1994, p. xii). Historian Leonard J. Moore argued that the Klan of the 1920s differed considerably from the Klan of the post-civil war era and the Klan that opposed the mid-century civil rights movement. The Klan, Moore claimed, “represented mainstream social and political concerns, not those of a disaffected fringe group” (1990, p. 342).

These concerns were often expressed in a vernacular that many Americans would not recognize as radical. Noted historian Richard Hofstadter, for instance, once described an essay by Imperial Wizard Hiram Wesley Evans as “not immoderate in tone” (1966, p. 125). Evans’ abilities to effectively project these concerns played a significant role in his leadership of the 1920s Klan. Evans’ ascent through the Klan hierarchy from Dallas dentist to national leader of the Klan marked the organization’s first major foray into politics (Lay, 1985, p. 79-80).

Evans’ essay, “The Klan’s Fight for American,” detailed “the major issue of the time as a struggle between ‘the great mass of Americans of the old pioneer stock’ and the ‘intellectually mongrelized Liberals’” (Hofstadter, 1966, p. 124). Evans oriented his essay in the defense of Americanism, a frequent theme in his writing as Imperial Wizard. Stating that the Evans’ essay “was not an altogether irrelevant statement of the case,” Hofstadter, indicated that the “difficulty was to find any but immoderate means of putting it into action” (1966, p. 125).

Evans’ rhetorical use of Americanism may be best described as strategically ambiguous, insofar as it appealed not only to the Klan faithful, but also sought to speak to those who might have a similar vision of that Americanism, without consideration of the ends to which such values served as means. As communication scholar Eric Eisenberg noted, “strategically ambiguous communication allows the source to both reveal and conceal,” (1984, p. 236), powers that Evans clearly coveted in his drive to expand the social and political power of his organization. For Evans, establishing the notion that the Klan was somehow organically connected to the widespread embrace of Americanism might further integrate that organization into the political mainstream at a point in its history in which its notoriety still trailed its influence.

Noting the historical fact of the Klan’s level of success in the 1920s, the rhetoric that Evans used to define Americanism and the means by which the Klan could achieve it are worthy of our attention. In this essay, I argue that Evans defined his notion of Americanism by making substantial efforts to associate the Klan’s goals with the American civil religious tradition. Next, I argue that Evans used a rhetoric couched in the terms of civil religious discourse to cloak the Klan’s moral interpretation of Americanism in vagueness. Furthermore, I argue that Evans uses civil religious discourse to identify to establish “alienism” as the primary threat to Americanism and thus the American civil religion. In adhering to those tactics, I claim that Evans’ rhetoric portrayed a unified, moral and political vision for American life that served the Klan throughout the 1920s, but ultimately undermined the virtues that the civil religious tradition was initially intended to maintain. Before undertaking such an endeavor, I will provide a more complete examination of civil religion, particularly in relation to political discourse.

### **The Contextual Frame: American Civil Religion**

Bellah first addressed the issue of civil religion in an essay published in 1967. As Bellah explained, the concept of civil religion was initially derived from the Rousseau's *Social Contract* (1967, p.5). He then argued that a variant of Rousseau's conception held sway with the founding fathers, manifesting itself in "a theme that lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God's will on earth" (1967, p. 5).

Civil religion, Bellah argued, played a unifying role in American political life. After devoting some thought onto the issue of civil religion in light of the political turmoil of the late 60s and early 70s, Bellah argued that civil religion had become "an empty and broken shell"(1992, p. 142). The failure to address any conception of a common good will lead American society to its doom, he suggested (1992, p. xiv).

While Bellah offered a renewed commitment to civil religion as a unifying vehicle for the American public (1992, p. 176), this should not to suggest that the concept is without its difficulties. The genocide of Native American populations and the existence of slavery, he claimed, occurred in spite of moral conceptions afforded by civil religion (1992, p. 37). However, from Bellah's perspective, the use of civil religious rhetoric for morally questionable ends is not the product of civil religion itself, but rather the failure to embrace an authentic civil religious discourse

While Bellah might label such instances as failures to embrace civil religious virtues, others have claimed that these instances might be better perceived as failures of civil religious rhetoric to cope with issues of heterogeneous populations (Albanese, 1982, p. 23; Fenn, 1977, p. 514). In order to address this shortcoming, civil religious discourses make use of ambiguity. As W. Lance Bennett explains, the use of ambiguity "ensures that the 'multiple realities' of a heterogeneous public can be accommodated within the sacred symbols of the state" (1979, p. 117).

For Hiram Wesley Evans, Protestantism and the concept that he labeled "Americanism" were intertwined as the ultimate manifestation of the American civil religion. As he noted in 1930:

Protestantism-religious, civil, or economic, and often all three-protest against human authority over the souls, the bodies, the rights and the yearnings of man-this was the spirit which animated, almost without exception, the men who made America. (*The Rising Storm* 166).

Before undergoing a more thorough examination of Evans's conception of "Americanism," I briefly review the historical context of Evans's writing.

### **The Historical Context: The Return of the Ku Klux Klan**

The Klan of the early twentieth century was founded in Atlanta Georgia on October 15 1915.<sup>1</sup> By 1922, after some internal turmoil, Dr. Hiram Wesley Evans, a dentist in Dallas Texas, who had risen to the position of Kligrap or executive secretary, assumed the role

of Imperial Wizard from founder Col. Joseph Simmons. Evans' own motivations for deposing Simmons' might have stemmed from Evans' large aspirations for the organization, conceiving of the Klan as what noted Klan historian Charles Alexander called a potentially "great militant political organization" (Alexander, 1965, p. 109).<sup>2</sup> By 1922, Evans successfully assumed Simmons' role as Imperial Wizard.<sup>3</sup>

David H. Bennett described the Klan's rise in the 1920s as "meteoric" (1988, p. 222). Klan membership reached figures estimated from 1.5 to 4.5 million in the mid-20s, the height of its power (Bennett, 1988, p. 222). There were a variety of factors that contributed to that growth. Bennett argued that the Klan was "a reaction to the displacement of older values by the new not only with confusion and anxiety, but resentment and anger" (1988, p. 204). This displacement was the result of rapid urbanization, which in turn resulted in a variety of repressive phenomena, among which the Klan was one of many.

As Stanley Coben noted that the Klan's rhetoric "reflected still widely accepted Victorian ideas about racial hierarchy and about the dangers to American society posed by Catholics, blacks, Jews, and Asians" (1991, p. 137). Lay has suggested that the appeal of the Klan lay beyond simple appeals to xenophobia, as recruiters generally touted "pure Americanism and the defense of traditional standards of law, order, and social morality" (1992, p. 7).

The Klan, under Evans' direction, became so politically successful that by 1925, their support brought a number of governors, and U.S. senators electoral success (Schwarz, 2000, p. 96). President Harding himself had been initiated into the order in the White House (Lay, 1992, p. 8). Klan political power was substantial, as Evans executed a number of political maneuvers at the 1924 Democratic and Republican national conventions.<sup>4</sup> On August 8, of 1925, a Klan march in Washington, D.C. would draw thousands to the capital, a moment that witnessed the Klan "at the apex of its power" (Schwarz, 2000, p. 95).

As Imperial Wizard, Evans wrote a number of essays and delivered a number of speeches both to the Klan faithful and to the public at large. Of the Klan's mission, Evans wrote "If it fulfills its mission, its future power and service are beyond calculation so long as America has any part of her destiny unfulfilled . . ." (1926, p. 63). Gauging how the rhetorical strategies that Evans employed in statements like the above to facilitate the Klan's conception of civil religion will yield valuable insights into both the Klan's history and into a broader historical understanding of American civil religion.

### **American Civil Religion and the Articulation of "Americanism"**

According to Evans, the Klan spoke for those struggling with the moral decay and economic distress of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His rhetoric explicitly identified those whom Evans sought to unify. While our common understanding of the Klan suggests that the prejudices of that organization were apparent, Evans' discourse hints that such prejudice was rarely, if ever, explicitly articulated. Evans' rhetoric used three primary strategies to articulate Americanism. The first firmly associated his organization with the nation's civil religious tradition.

The second used an intentional ambiguity that posited Americanism as an intangible force that could not be concretely identified, but still existed and exerted tangible influence. The

strategic use of ambiguity also facilitated an ability to adopt all those qualities that he determined to be signifiers of Americanism back to the earlier civil religious traditions that defined the Klan.

The third strategy consisted of an extreme anti-alien sentiment that posited alienism as *the* threat to the continuation of the aforementioned civil religious experience. By defining the American civil religion as one bounded by Protestant considerations, with vaguely defined notions of Americanism and parameters which excluded all those groups who sought refuge and shelter in the United States, the Klan portrayed a unified, all encompassing vision for American political life that served them well throughout the 1920s (Bennett, 1979, p. 106). With the Klan's illiberal orientation in mind, Evans's appeared to be reconciling the Klan's efforts within the most palatable framework available to his audience.

### **The Klan and America's Civil Religious History**

First, Evans embraced explicit references to the interconnection of the Klan and American civil religion. For example, after citing George Washington, Evans stated:

From this quotation it is perfectly clear that the founders of the nation did not desire to separate the State from Christian morality, based upon religion. They saw clearly that a free government must itself take over many of these moral functions which an autocratic government leaves in the hands of the State Church (1930, p. 23).

In Evans's work, the separation of Church and State is the ultimate protection against unwarranted sectarian influence from the Catholic Church and that separation is distinct from the maintenance of traditional Protestant virtue. Evans's rhetoric mirrors Bellah's conception of civil religious rhetoric is distinctly non-sectarian (Bellah, 1967, p. 8), as his embrace of Protestantism is largely the product of a rejection of Catholic sectarianism.

In that the Klan's greatest opposition often came from American Catholics, and given the growing significance of the Catholic population in the United States (Noble 198), Evans wisely avoided attacking Catholics as individuals, opting instead to attack Catholicism as an institution. Fear of the Catholic Church's authority was a persistent theme throughout Evans work. As he noted:

They are used to seeing the government submit to the moral dictation of a church, but cannot understand why, when it refuses such dictation, it should submit to the individual consciences of its citizens (1930, p. 181).

Evans suggested that the Klan was not anti-Catholic, but instead anti-Catholic Church. He also took pains to identify those Catholics who disagreed with the Church. The individuals might find league with the Klan, he claimed, as the Church has already dismissed them as "bad" Catholics ("The Klan's Fight for Americanism" 48). This created a more unified perception among lapsed Catholics and their Protestant brethren in the Klan. Surely a "religion" which undermined the institutions that the civil religion sought to maintain was to be excluded from the larger civil religious dialogue.

A great deal of criticism was oriented around the Church's involvement in politics, which again, was relevant in light of the degree to which it undermined the non-sectarian presumption of civil religion. The Catholic Church, he claimed, threatened to erode the wall between church and state that maintained freedom (1926, p. 47). To prove his point, he cited instances of Catholic participation in urban politics and then explained that Catholics often found themselves in political coalitions with Jews and other "aliens."

While he suggested that participation alone did not demonstrate the sanction of the church in politics, he did cite his experiences at the Democratic national convention of 1924 to claim that the massive presence of Catholic priests there seemed to prove that the Church was indeed directly involved in the affairs of State.

There was some tension in Evans's critique of the Church and his profession of Protestant faith. While he criticized the Catholic Church for the very nature of its centralized belief system, he also recognized the religious obligations of Klansmen as emanating from biblical tradition. As he stated:

The order goes to the great scholar and leader in the early Church, the Apostle Paul, the Evangel to the Gentile, to find its creed and code of conduct. In his Epistle to the Romans, he carries the ideal of Klannishness to its highest levels, and in the twelfth chapter of that great exposition which he makes of the teachings of Christ, he sets up a standard of character and of conduct by which every true Klansmen must measure his life. (Date unknown B, p. 7-8).

It was in common and shared religious tradition, Evans proclaimed, that the Klansman found his ultimate purpose. That tradition resulted in a uniformity of theology and epistemology that ultimately challenged the veracity of the Klan's claim that their primary issue with Catholicism was political rather than theological. Distinguishing *civil* religious experience from a Catholic religious experience that might bridge the wall between church and state, established the Klan's parameters for religious propriety. Protestantism, it is suggested, was excusable in the exercise of democracy, as it did not constitute a distinct sectarian affiliation.

### **Ambiguous Americanism and Civil Religion**

Evans's second strategy involved the explicit definition of Americanism. By articulating Americanism as an intangible quality, he established a unique prophetic vision for "old stock Americans," as only legitimate Americans like Evans can identify the components of Americanism. In the following passage, Evans explicitly identified Americanism as an inherent quality that did not require explicit definition:

It is merely playing with words and fogging the situation to claim, as some do, that the Americans themselves do not know what Americanism is, or to say as Edward Bok said, "The first need is to Americanize the Americans." (1930, p. 8-9)

To hazard a guess as to what Americanism was rendered an individual suspect. Americanism was so innate as to defy the need for definition. This was specifically in concert with the ambiguity function of previous civil religious discourse. In order to address diverse audiences, civil religious rhetoric necessitates ambiguity (Bennett, 1979, p. 116). Ambiguity

creates participatory space in Evans's rhetoric, allowing all who witness it to feel a part of the Klan's struggle. While the range of that audience is still limited to white Anglo Protestants, the heterogeneity of interests among that group are reconciled by the strategic employment of ambiguous Americanism.

This also demonstrates the major ethical shortcoming of civil religion. In being appropriated towards illiberal ends, and given the fiction of a potentially unified audience, civil religion need only be addressed as an appeal to a limited audience, with the further effect of trivializing any heterogeneous difference that does exist within that audience. Civil religious discourse works best in creating the perception that any difference beyond race and personal faith are irrelevant to larger questions of unity.

Perhaps the most explicit definition of Americanism was ultimately an effort to tie the abstract conception of Americanism to the earlier efforts to place the Klan within the civil religious perspective. In Evans's words

Our cause *is* true Americanism. This means in all vital things a superior Christian civilization for America. Our destiny is the common welfare, materially and mentally, physically and spiritually, upon a plane high above any mankind has ever known. (1923, p. 3).

Americanism, then, was that terminal value achieved when Americans adhered to established civil religious perspectives.

Evans's sense of history and the civil religious perspective was to some degree limited to serve his own ends. When necessary, he vaguely alluded to the history of the Klan without explicitly delineating his points of departure from those philosophies. While such vagueness might have been intended to retain the loyalties of his predecessors, it also served to further illustrate the benefit of vagueness. As Evans noted, "beneath the stupid or dangerous oratory of the early leaders lay certain fundamental truths...which matured automatically" (1926, p. 36). He then said "it laid the basis for the astounding growth of the last three years, and for the present immense influence" (1926, p. 36). The above referenced passage allowed Evans to criticize the past regime of power, while he also cast himself as a rational agent in comparison to that regime.

### **Anti-Alienism and Civil Religion**

Finally, while intentional vagueness mars a more complete understanding of Evans's Americanism, attention to his anti-alien discourse illuminates that concept more clearly. It is the immigrant, Evans warned, that truly threatened Americanism (Date Unknown A, p. 3). The immigrant problem, it appeared, was largely related to the undesirability of the alien masses. The alien violated the tenets of the American covenant for their own benefit. For example, Evans portrayed the immigrant as an unmitigated capitalist, "Ignorant and unskilled, covetous and greedy, they come to this country. . . with the one sole and ultimate end in view-the accumulation of American money where with to retire in later years to their beloved homelands" (Date Unknown A, p. 5). Aliens continued to pose a threat as they clearly lacked the qualities that were exceptional in Americans, as they consisted of "ignorant, superstitious, religious devotees" (Date Unknown A, p. 8).

In other instances, Evans made careful efforts to defend Americanism from being tainted by alienism. The struggle was ultimately the Nordic people against the alien hordes, who had rendered the Nordic man a stranger in his own home: “Shortly *they* came to dominate us” (1926, p. 39) he began. “So the Nordic American,” Evans continued, “today is a stranger . . . A most unwelcome stranger” (1926, p. 39).

The domestic American experience in WWI greatly informed Evans’s arguments against alienism. The war, he argued, unveiled for all Americans the menace lying just beneath the surface of American life of alienism. Liberalism’s folly, according to Evans, was its association with foreign ideals. As he claimed: “The plain people now see that Liberalism has come completely under the dominance of weaklings and parasites whose alien “idealism” reaches its logical peak in the Bolshevik platform of ‘produce as little as you can, beg or steal from those who do not produce and kill the producer for thinking he is better than you’” (1926, p. 42). He associated Liberalism with both Bolshevism and nihilism, hounding it as a conspiratorial philosophy in much the same way that prior democratic ideals were dismissed as parts of the Jacobin conspiracy in 18<sup>th</sup> century France and America (Hofman, 1993).

Evans’s anti-alien discourse defined not so much Americanism as it did the parameters for those things that were distinctly non-American. It established sectarian limits on the American civil religion, confining that religion to one that advanced Americanism while it avoided all traits projected unto non-Americans.

### **Concluding Remarks**

By defining the American civil religion as one bounded by Protestant considerations, with vaguely defined notions of Americanism and parameters which excluded all those groups who sought refuge and shelter in the United States, the Klan portrayed a unified, all encompassing vision for American political life that served them well throughout the 1920s. Evans’s rhetoric used three primary strategies to articulate his organization’s place within the American civil religious tradition. The first associated his organization with the nation’s civil religious tradition, isolating Catholicism as a legitimate constraint on the full non-sectarian exercise of religious freedom. The second used an intentional ambiguity that posited Americanism as an intangible force that could not be concretely identified, but still existed and exerted tangible influence. The third strategy posited alienism as *the* threat to the continuation of the aforementioned civil religious experience. Americanism and civil religion were thus most closely defined by negation.

In spite of apparent successes, the Klan began to experience some declines by 1925. Violence against the Klan became commonplace as the Klan had expanded in the early 20s (Goldberg, 1996, p. 42). Rumors of Klan violence, and a violent scandal involving Midwestern Klan leader D.C. Stephenson led to declines in support for the Klan in the South (Bennett, 1988, p. 224-225, 235-236). Regardless of the particulars of the Klan’s dissolution, that organization’s entry into the political mainstream deserves our attention. While Bellah’s plea in *The Broken Covenant* seemed based upon the suggestion that civil religion could restore the republic back to its prior virtue, this essay seems to suggest that such comments should be approached with caution. Evans’s rhetoric seems to illustrate that the inability to truly address a genuinely heterogeneous public renders civil religion more ideally suited toward illiberal ends.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The founding consisted of a symbolic cross-burning, and was scheduled to occur two weeks prior to the Atlanta premiere of D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation," a film heroically depicting the post-Reconstruction Era Klan as the defenders of Southern virtue. Simmons would use the film as a recruiting device. After the film's release, Simmons would have advertisements for Klan membership run alongside advertisements for Birth of a Nation (Maclean 13).

<sup>2</sup> More specifically, Evans's conception of the organization "necessitated the elimination of Simmons and Clark as powers in the Klan, the regularization of the order's financial practices and the conversion of the Klan into a movement"(Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan In the SouthWest*, 109).

<sup>3</sup> Simmons' did not exactly go quietly, and he and Clarke would maintain animus with the Klan long after they had officially parted company with the organization. See Bennett, 213-215.

<sup>4</sup> Convention rules would quickly be modified in order to ensure "that there would never be a wearying debacle like the 1924 one in New York"(Golway 52).