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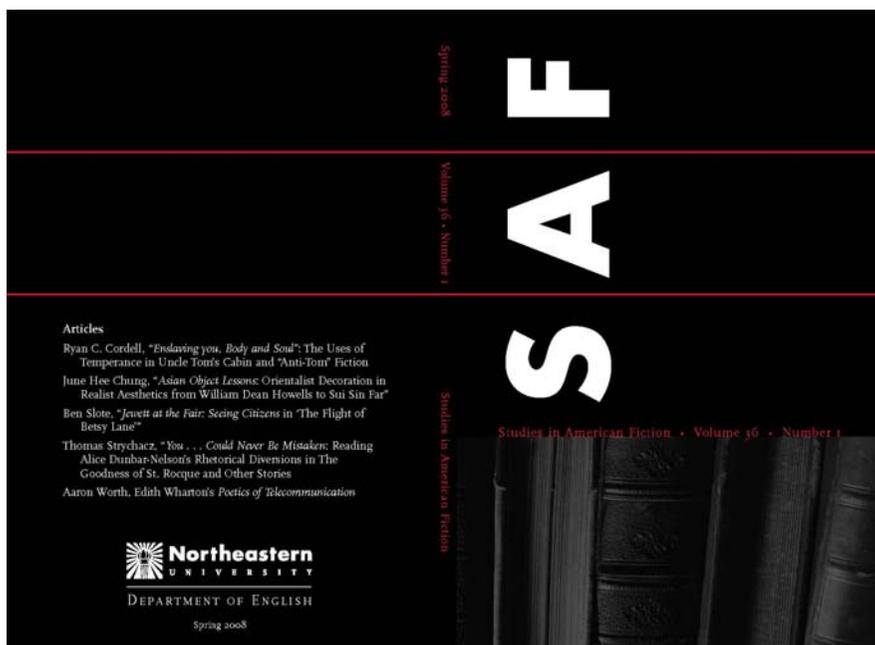
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Albert H. Tricomi, *America's Missionary Evangelism in Sinclair Lewis's The God-Seeker*

AMERICA'S MISSIONARY EVANGELICALISM IN SINCLAIR LEWIS'S *THE GOD-SEEKER*

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Published near the end of Lewis's career in 1949 on a subject no one ever expected from him, *The God-Seeker* has sometimes been taken as an unimportant, antiquarian novel.¹ But its much misunderstood and underappreciated subject is really the nature of American idealism and ideology, whose soul, Lewis believed, was still being formed. Set for the most part on the Minnesota frontier in the late 1840s, *The God-Seeker* renders in extensive detail the core beliefs and trials of those missionaries whose frontier work was supported by the American Board Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), an organization that from 1812 sent its missionaries to every kind of frontier post in America and beyond. More seasoned and psychologically complex than Lewis's better known, topical potboiler on religious revivalism in America, *Elmer Gantry* (1927), *The God-Seeker* is not a novel of religious hypocrisy, nor is it principally a piece of propaganda or a "tract," to use Sheldon Grebstein's useful category of classification.² Rather, it is a probing historical novel that gauges the insidious effects of an inflexible religious ideology upon the indigenous Indians and, ultimately, upon the missionaries themselves. The interplay between missionary religious ideology on the one hand and the opportunism of commercial entrepreneurs, settlers, and military nationalists, on the other, as they mutually affect the lives of the Dakota Sioux is one of the novel's important contributions to a critical understanding of America as a "promised land" and "crusader state."³

To historicize *The God-Seeker* in this ideological way is to understand more deeply not only the cultural and political moment Lewis depicted, but also the moment in which Lewis himself was writing. This post-war period was one of rising domestic tensions over racial segregation. When the Democratic party at its convention in 1948 adopted a pro-civil rights platform, the old alliance Franklin Roosevelt had forged between progressive Northerners and conservative Southerners shattered. Famously, Strom Thurmond, then Governor of South Carolina, walked out of the convention with a substantial number of disaffected delegates from the Deep South called "Dixiecrats" and proceeded to run for President of the United States as a pro-Jim Crow segregationist on the States Rights' Democratic Party ticket. Internationally, this period was also fraught with tension over the United

States's "Cold War" confrontation with an emergent Soviet Union, which American politicians described as a battle between the god-fearing, "free world" and the atheistic, subversive followers of Communism.⁴

The hovering presence of these contexts in the novel reveals Lewis's commitment to what I would call "deep fictional historicism," not just the fictional re-enactment of historical events (the novel *is* thoroughly grounded in that), but also the determined exploration, mostly by innuendo and topical echoes, of America's missionary ideology as it reveals itself in recurring patterns over time. Such a history is capable of demonstrating how the "character" and ideology of one era continues to reverberate in later ones, albeit with new applications. In particular, *The God-Seeker* attempts to present a foundational account of American culture beginning in the early nineteenth century and proceeding through the year 1853. However, at strategic points its language becomes proleptic, as the novel suggests mid-twentieth century contexts for America's missionary idealism. Lewis's historical novel also continues to resound beyond its date of publication to our present historical moment, and although I make only passing reference to the novel's contemporary relevance in this essay, I will at least point out in this place that American missionary ideology continues to exert its influence over the national psyche in the evangelical policies of the second Bush administration, which in 2004 enjoyed the decisive support and pervasive media notice of evangelical Christians in its war for "freedom" and "universal human rights" against alien regimes in Afghanistan and the Middle-East. I make this still topical point to underscore a conceptual one, that cultural studies theorists often gauge the cultural power of a literary work by its ability to endure over time.⁵ By this standard as well I think *The God-Seeker* should be accounted a significant work.

Not to be neglected, the stylistic mode in which Lewis composed *The God-Seeker* was an ideological choice as well as an artistic one—Lewis's literary realism versus the sentimental romanticism of his forebears. To illustrate this contestation no novelist is more pertinent than James Fenimore Cooper, and of all his Indian novels none more fitting than *The Oak Openings*, which appeared in 1849—exactly a century before Sinclair Lewis's *The God-Seeker*. Like Lewis's novel, Cooper's possesses an autumnal quality, composed near the end of a long career. More importantly, the subject of both is frontier missionary America, and the purpose of each is to take the measure of American civilization. Surprisingly, Cooper's novel concludes in 1848, precisely the year that the body of Lewis's novel represents, but the meaning of

America as a missionary nation is in Lewis's handling completely reinterpreted.

The Oak Openings imparts its memorable final impression by depicting a converted Indian chief, formerly called "Scalping Peter," who has given up the rage and savage pride of his youth to embrace in all humility (he remains illiterate) the Christian religion. This solitary figure, himself transformed by the missionary sacrifice of a former enemy, Parson Amen, has come to live in peace among his white friends in the place of his youth, a place that has been transformed into the new wheat-threshing state of Michigan. The images that convey these changes comprise for Cooper a concluding, if somber, affirmation of what his contemporaries called "the Indian question." Speaking in his own voice in the novel's final chapter, Cooper, as narrator, muses:

How often, in turning over the pages of history, do we find civilization, the arts, moral improvement, nay, Christianity itself, following the bloody train left by the conqueror's car, and good pouring in upon a nation by avenues that at first were teeming only with the approaches of seeming evils! In this way, . . . will the invasion of the forests, and prairies, and "openings," of the red man be made to atone for itself by carrying with it the blessings of the Gospel, and a juster view of the relations which man bears to his Creator. (238)⁶

The good Gospel news of *The Oak Openings* is that a "civilized red man" (236) can live in a transformed world among the whites, for he has himself been transfigured in Christ. But his heritage is such that he must encounter this new society as a little child, having relinquished entirely his former knowledge and identity. No longer "Scalping," Peter, who earns his Christian name with a faith much like that of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom, describes himself as feeling "meek" in the moments following his conversion—"An Injin like a child, . . . nebber know. Even pale-face squaw know more dan great chief. Nebber feel as do now. Heart soft as young squaw's. Don't hate anybody no more. Wish well to all tribe, and color, and nation" (222). This resolution, at once tragic and beautiful, is the only possible one, Cooper suggestively imagines, in which the vanishing Indian can continue to live in the modern world.

By contrast, Lewis reinterprets the Christian mission to the Indian by redoing at almost every opportunity Cooper's uplifting, romantic tale of reconciliation, and substituting for it a withering, comprehensive realism. Whereas Cooper invests a lonely, former Indian chief with a halo to *represent* in the spiritual sense a "saved"

race, Lewis stages an entire Indian community in its daily activities, treating not only the men but the women and children in their deplorable material and spiritual circumstances subsequent to their early encounters with the white race and, in particular, evangelical missionaries. Put in conceptual terms, Cooper's *The Oak Openings* really functions as a theodicy; it justifies the admitted wrongs of the past through a compensatory appeal to the blessings of Christianity as bestowed on the heathen. Lewis's *The God-Seeker*, by contrast, offers a thorough-going rebuke to such a roseate reading of America's missionary achievements.

Growing up in early nineteenth-century Massachusetts under the authoritarian rule of his father, Uriel, Aaron Gadd, Lewis's title figure, is inspired by the evangelical preacher, Reverend Harge, to return with him to the Minnesota territory to convert the Sioux. Responding to the call, Aaron foregoes his relationship with the sensual, coarse Nadine to experience the hardships and disillusionment of the Indian mission. Intended as a representative place, the Minnesota frontier mission stands synecdochally for America as an evangelical nation, both in its blindness and its possibilities. There Aaron renews his acquaintance with Selene, the beautiful half-breed daughter of the fur trader Caesar Lanark, whom he had met back East, and finally leaves the mission to settle with her in the burgeoning town of Saint Paul where in the years preceding the Civil War he finds a new sense of mission by establishing a labor union and safeguarding a runaway Negro from his slave-catching master.

Lewis's consciousness of purpose is evident from the two escaped slave stories he wraps around the body of this novel of the Minnesota Indian frontier. The first of these, at the beginning of the novel, concerns a runaway slave, whom in 1830 Aaron's father Uriel protects and then sends on his way, beyond Massachusetts. The second, at novel's end, shows Aaron himself who in 1853, spurred on by his radical brother Elijah, joins the Underground Railroad to protect and champion the labor rights of the escaped slave Henry Oldham. The thematic link joining both framing episodes to the body of the novel is the mission of "saving" members of two oppressed races, both of whom are victims of a racial caste system in America.

Particularly pertinent to Lewis's historical vision of the missionary enterprise in America is that Uriel functions as a prototype or exemplar of a problematic, duty-bound missionary identity. In what turns out to be an emblematic exchange, Aaron asks why the escaped

slave wasn't invited to family prayers to help save his soul. Coldly, Uriel replies, "What makes you think darkies have souls?" and when the confused Aaron asks why then his father assists the darkies, Uriel responds conclusively, "To save our own souls!"⁷ In this way the outer narratives provide a topical reference point for the civil rights issues of Lewis's day while also preparing for the body of the narrative on the Minnesota frontier.

As an emblematic figure, Uriel lives on in Reverend Balthazar Harge who becomes Aaron's father figure at the Minnesota mission and, like Uriel, is an unremitting fundamentalist. No other missionary figure dominates *The God-Seeker* so completely or is more important for his views than this pompous, silk-hatted, hard-drinking but fervent Presbyterian from Pennsylvania. As narrator, Lewis records Harge's unbending Calvinist perspective on his heathen flock in luridly judgmental terms: "His station . . . was on a river . . . in a wilderness . . . surrounded by the Sioux or Dakota savage Indians, hell-flamed, gorge-raising, murderous, adulterous, Sabbath-breaking sons of Belial, who nevertheless kept begging like scared children in the dark for someone to bring them the healing gospel of Christ Jesus and give them a chance to climb to civilization" (45–46). Harge's idealism thus reveals itself as paternalistic longing mixed with frank disgust for the native Americans. As a revelation of character, the speech discloses a disturbing psychology in which Harge's religious zeal is shown to be comprised of powerful unresolved feelings of duty and repulsion.

Seeking historical authenticity, Lewis turned in the body of his novel to the original mission in his native state of Minnesota to convert the savage Indian. To prepare himself he studied for two months in 1947 at the Minnesota Historical Society and wrote enthusiastically to Bennett Cerf of his archival research that he was "reading never-yet-published letters of the years 1830–1860."⁸ Out of that research came the historical recreations of character we discover in the novel.⁹ Extensive historical work on the Presbyterian frontier missions over the last thirty years reveals Lewis's rendering of Harge's attitudes to be a just representation—not a mean-spirited caricature as his critics charged—of attitudes held generally at fundamentalist missions. Ayako Uchida's examination of the Protestant missions among the Dakota Sioux, a study that exhibits no knowledge whatsoever of *The God-Seeker*, draws extensively from Dakota missionary diaries during the period that Lewis represents. These repeatedly depict the Indians as "backsliding," polygamous, "devil-worshipping" lovers of the "savage" life, full of "animal excitement" in their killing, scalp dancing, and wild song.¹⁰ Stephen R. Riggs, a diarist, author, and

historical founder of a Minnesota mission station in Traverse des Sioux, who also enjoys a notable minor role in Lewis's novel, delineated the heathen in the following terms in 1837: "Oh! When will the waters of the sanctuary wash away the abominations of the people, and heal their polluted souls! Our hope is in God who has promised to answer the prayers of his church, when accompanied by corresponding efforts for the salvation of the lost and perishing."¹¹ Riggs' attitudes toward the American Indian were, in fact, general among mission leaders.

Often these same attitudes were applied indiscriminately to all non-Christians. Lyman Beecher, for example, a famous, early member of the ABCFM, delivered a sermon asserting that "the Heathen" everywhere are

all recognized as depraved; all under condemnation for their depravity of heart, and abominable deeds; all condemned for their idolatry, as the consummation both of folly and guilt. . . . The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against them, and they are represented as needing the Saviour, the bible, the sabbath, and the preaching of the gospel.¹²

Although Harge's backwoods language is perhaps more inflammatory than the formal writings of Riggs and Beecher, they are all of the same order. What has been so unfortunate for Lewis's reputation is that previous assessments of *The God-Seeker* have censured the novel for prejudicially rendering America's religious heritage and yet presented no historical evidence for its inauthenticity. What was—and is—really at stake here, one suspects, was Lewis's challenge to a prior salutary conception of what America and its missionaries were "really" like.

Lewis is perhaps the only canonical twentieth-century novelist who probed so carefully the paternalistic impulse inherent in missionary evangelicalism. In an almost medically diagnostic role, Lewis shows how this paternalism issues from self-aggrandizing motives that allow missionaries to confirm over and over again their superiority to the benighted pagans they serve. Lewis's manner of demonstration, not really recognized or appreciated among his mid-century critics, seeks to make explicit these otherwise covert motives through a transparently self-revealing, almost comic, irony. The result is the cock-eyed pomposity of Reverend Harge, who declares, "[God] has sent us missionaries to them with the wonderful tidings that if they turn to Jesus like little children—and if by God's will they are elect—then they may be saved just like regular folks. What a lavishing of mercy to send us to them!" (217). Harge's self-congratulation is, of course, sus-

tained not by Harge's personality alone, but also by his missionary identity and, in a more general sense, the culture at large.

To frontier missionaries and nineteenth-century Americans generally, the notion of "culture" meant not the set of reciprocal obligations or even the system of institutions that bind a people together, but hierarchical stages in human development with Americans and other Westerners at the top.¹³ Put more emphatically, "culture" meant "civilization" and civilization meant race, and race meant that primitive people were at the bottom and whites, with their knowledge of the Word, at the top. These ideas were especially current among those whites who worked at the intersection of the races. The ABCFM of the Presbyterian Church was probably the most influential institutional religious presence on the frontier. Its missionaries, the record discloses, depicted their heathen charges by figurative phrases that defined them as foundering in a culture of "darkness," which was "the pit," "the mire," beset by "dense clouds of ignorance" . . . [and] 'chains of idolatry' that had imprisoned their souls" and could lead them to "eternal damnation."¹⁴ Underlying these attitudes of repulsion was, of course, the unmovable conviction that the races were separated by a chasm between those who had received the Word of Jesus Christ and those who had not. Yet by teaching the Gospel these missionaries believed they could civilize and so save the savages, whom they saw as "Jehovah's Stepchildren."¹⁵

Despite their general loathing of Indian culture, most ABCFM missionaries genuinely dedicated themselves to the welfare of the Indians. Reverend Harge expresses this side well. The passages depicting Harge's long night of the soul, in which he anguishes with Aaron over whether he has been really effective, are moving. Notwithstanding his having converted thirty-seven Indians, the Reverend confesses that he is unsure whether any of them have really "accepted Jesus fully" (183). He even confides that his one male convert, the binge-afflicted Isaac Weeps-by-Night, has confusedly mixed his faith in Jesus with the beliefs of his ancestors and his Indian god Wakantanka. Moreover, he has two wives, although the mission has been trying (in vain) to wean him to monogamy. These are strong points for the authenticity of Lewis's representation.

For Harge, the sectarian Calvinist, the mixed faith of Isaac Weeps-by-Night (the name carrying the emotional burden of Indian history) is not acceptable. Feeling acutely his failings, Harge laments his inability really to learn or to express himself competently in the Sioux language and resolves to do better by humbling his pride and going to the Sioux's own settlements to promote the true faith.¹⁶ This portrayal

of the inner man shows that while Harge's pomposity and pride are subjected to caricature, his self-doubt and, at bottom, self-knowledge make him a serious figure whose character issues from a well-imagined, historically plausible complexity. So too, Harge's kind of disconsolate observations of sullenness, "backsliding," and incomplete conversions among Native Americans were recorded early on by Mary Rowlandson in her famous diary and were, in fact, all too prevalent among reporting missionaries.¹⁷ Thus while Lewis dramatizes Harge's zealotry at close quarters, he also records Harge's anguished need, characteristic of his breed, to find a way "to let me help them" (188). Yet underneath even this fervor lies the doubt leading sometimes to despair over the entire enterprise. As Clifton J. Phillips observes, missionary statesmen working among aboriginal tribes "gradually came to realize the increasing hopelessness of merging the primitive tribesman into Christian civilization."¹⁸

Through several other missionary patriarchs, most notably the physician, Dr. Thomas S. Williamson, moderator of the Dakota Presbytery, and Stephen Riggs, Lewis makes the point that there were frontier voices more extreme than Harge's. Speaking with dispassionate professionalism, the doctor opines that the degenerate behavior of the Sioux—"Lewd, corrupt of heart and unrepentant"—proves that they are already Satan's own, and, "Possibly we ought to let *all* the Indians, except a handful [who accept the Gospel], perish, like the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah" (118). Eschewing this bloody opinion, Riggs merely reaffirms America's informal caste system, graciously opining that some Indians "are just as good as white men, in their *place*—but keep them in their place!" (119).

Dr. Williamson was one of the early members of the Minnesota mission, as were the Poage sisters (one of whom was married to Williamson), and the Pond brothers. All of these persons are historical, appear in Lewis's novel, and are described by Riggs himself in *Tak-Koo Wah-Kan; or, The Gospel Among the Dakotas* and *Mary and I. Forty Years with the Sioux*.¹⁹ These factual narratives, however, present virtually no dialogue and avoid reporting controversial attitudes or in-house conflicts. Thus the disagreements among these characters in the novel along with the distinctive set of opinions they express are substantially the author's own, which is to say that Lewis brings them to life.

Standing in opposition to this circle of evangelicalists is the fictional representation of Selene's baronial father, the aptly named Caesar Lanark, a hard-headed trader and entrepreneur. A mocker of the mission, Lanark sometimes sounds like Lewis himself, as when he wryly

observes, "We have given the Indians consumption, influenza, measles, syphilis, and the hymns of Charles Wesley" (177). Lanark also condemns the scoundrels who seek to obliterate the Indians, but only because that strategy prevents him from "gently pasturing them and milking them over the years" (178).²⁰ Extermination is, in short, bad for business. Applying the same logic, he observes that the buffalo will themselves soon be exterminated, and when they are the Indians will have to become farmers, buying their plows and grain at his prices. "It is not I," he explains with sang-froid, "but the March of Civilization that is ruthless. . . . Progress is power. I don't believe in sniveling pity" (178). His daughter Selena, by contrast, expresses just this kind of sentimentality, championing the Indians because they are "so unhappy, so plundered!" (79). A generation later, in 1880, even the most liberal of Indian advocates, such as the Bishop of Minnesota, H. P. Whipple, in effect confirmed Lanark's judgment when he wrote that the American people "do accept the teaching that manifest destiny will drive the Indians from the earth. The inexorable has no tears or pity at the cries of anguish of the doomed race."²¹

This exceptionally well orchestrated, historically grounded range of attitudes demonstrates that Reverend Harge's severe judgment of the Indians was by no means the most extreme. They also illustrate how overstated was Mark Schorer's judgment that the historical elements in *The God-Seeker* "are all in the externals, 'research,' and these externals, while they hardly add up to an imaginative reconstruction, are nevertheless more 'real' than any of the characters."²² Schorer's attack is invidious because it devalues as "externals" precisely those features that really matter in historical novels—notably, truth of argument—and also because it denies the psychological realities among the missionaries that Lewis represented so well. Flush with enthusiasm over finishing his book, Lewis may have overstated the case when he wrote, "*God-Seeker* may be the best book I have ever written," but he was accurate when he added, "It is certainly the most serious."²³

Aaron Gadd begins his quest in the faith of his fathers. Considering that the author of *Elmer Gantry* had vaunted his atheism in public by inviting God to strike him dead,²⁴ Lewis's sympathetic realization of Aaron's spiritual journey may be read as a testament to the only faith Lewis professed, a humanitarian progressivism. Aaron's growth is remarkable because it begins in a combination of idealism and ignorance. He absorbs and initially reflects the attitudes of his missionary mentor. For instance, he vows to do "what I humbly can to help those

sin-encompassed, ignorant, dirty savages, those poor Sioux" (77). So too when he hears a Negro and a Chinese missionary preach, he thinks the former's role all right because his father had smuggled Negroes, but Aaron is so unprepared for the eloquence of "that Chink" that he can only muse, "Maybe . . . heathen people can become just as good as us!" (43). However, Aaron is not rendered merely as a naturalistic figure wholly the product of his environment, for Lewis endows him with an impulse, born of the sympathy he had as a boy for a dog his father had brutally shot to death, to make party with others, to join rather than to separate. This impulse accounts for his spiritual growth. Beginning as a Congregationalist missionary—that is one with a demotic faith—Aaron is different from the Presbyterian Harge and Uriel the Calvinist. His orientation, pertinent to Lewis's social concerns at mid-century, is to embrace a raceless utopia and even the doctrine of "human perfectibility" (characteristic of nineteenth-century reformers), which Lewis locates among the "heretical Methodists" (96), and later in the novel among Unitarian thinkers.

Aaron's ignorance is mixed up with a clichéd romanticization of the missionary calling. Disabusing him of his illusions is Harge's second wife, the consumptive, slow-in-dying Mercie, whose bitterness and disillusionment hover over the entire settlement. From Mercie, who has lost three children and whose very name suggests a cry for help and perhaps forgiveness, Aaron learns that the missionary wives are small-town girls who loved to sing in the choir, pure and enthusiastic. On the prairie they then write verses or magazine articles about the savage scenery and God's goodness. Meanwhile they are pining in the muddy wilderness for their homes back East, delivering and taking caring of babies without proper medical care. In their strange surroundings, they and their children are scared, catch fevers, get sick, and often die hundreds of miles from any doctor.²⁵ As a well-bred girl from Maine, Mercie is the soul of delicate femininity, but she has been worn out by the work and the pitilessness of the prairie. "Missionary work," she says to her unseasoned confidant, "is hard on the men, but it kills the women"; so the widowers go back East to find new, fresh girls, "helpless helpers," to replace the ones they've worn out (161). Of their self-important husbands, Mercie complains that they "all claim they give God the credit [for their Gospeling], but they don't sound so" (160). When their missionary husbands get the Spirit, they get amorous, and their wives, she concludes, get the babies.

From the cultured Luna Speezer, who hates everything connected with the mission work, Aaron observes the disturbing effects of zealotry and repression. As a reader of Jonathan Edwards's *Future Pun-*

ishment of the *Wicked Unavoidable*, she feels the doom menacing her, the fierceness of the punishment. In an ecstasy of indulgent self-hate, she confesses her guiltiness:

“My heart is filth and pollution, contaminated with loathsome softness and decay! I love the glittering serpent of sin, and toy with him as with a shameful earthly lover! I vaunt myself, I display my weak delight in music and complain that out here there are no musicians, no libraries, no art works. I boast of my many talents, and all, all is ashes and vanity—woe is me!” (148)

To do God’s work in the wilderness, Luna believes she cannot love the modern world, but since she is a modern woman who loves the world, she cannot love herself. And from Huldah, who finds herself attracted to Aaron, Aaron discovers that this most practical and maternal of the mission women has given herself to mystical visions, whose sensuality takes her out of herself and provides a refuge from her present condition. Each of these women of the faith is living wounded in circumstances that lead them to self-negation or spiritual flight.

If Aaron’s experiences reveal how unfulfilled and frequently unhappy are the lives of the missionaries he had idealized, his contacts with the Indians—the entire *raison d’être* for the missionary enterprise—also take him on a journey to enlightenment filled with disillusion. Just how well thought through is Lewis’s rejection of Aaron’s initial romantic construction of America’s racial history with the Indian may be measured by the quotidian realism he has Aaron face. The very first Sioux Aaron ever meets accosts him, barking, “Gimme two bits, Mister. Hungry!” (102). He soon sees a poor Sioux woman hoeing with a cradle on her back and muses, with telling topical resonance, “Cute lil pickaninny–papoose I mean” (111). A little later he notices a number of Indian women—not trading tomahawks for kettles, blankets, or guns, as he had excitedly imagined, but digging potatoes to eke out a meager existence. The missionaries seem to believe that civilizing the “Injuns” involves little more than getting them “to start plowing and put on pantaloons and accept the Gospel” (130). They have no sense of the profound loss of cultural will and identity that the adoption of such behaviors entails. Still later Aaron observes a witch doctor raucously performing a faith cure and discovers that the Indian has learned from the blackrobes and traders how to “make a circus and get paid for it” (208).

Such exposition thoroughly undercuts the indulgent sentimentality of Cooper’s historical fiction in the *Leatherstocking* tales, along with its nostalgia for the American frontier. In a few places Lewis

actually invokes his novelistic forerunner as when Aaron comes to realize that the Indians are neither Harge's degenerate heathens nor "the romantic woodlanders of Fenimore Cooper" (207). In so doing, Lewis forces his readers to remove the rose-colored glasses that bathe the frontier in mythic splendor. So when Selene celebrates the polish of the Oberlin educated Black Wolf as "'too romantic!'" her father corrects her—"No, my dear Selene, the romance of the Indians is like the bogus romance of the pioneers"; "There are no romantic Indians. . . . [A]n Indian goes to his hunting just as prosaically as a factor goes to his office" (298–99).

Accompanying this deflating realism is Aaron's moral anguish as he realizes what the missionary path really entails. Beginning with the observation that those Indian "vagabonds" closest to the fort are very different from those upriver, he comes to realize that the more contact the Indians have with the white man, the more sullen, unmotivated, impoverished, drunken, and diseased they become (128). So begins Aaron's anxious moral questioning. "Does the religion we bring them," he asks one brother, "make up for the evil we bring?" (130). As a disciple his initial judgment is that if "one single Indian, hearing the true word of God, is saved," even if a thousand are killed, "[i]sn't that worth while?" (129). This is pious genocidal logic; it places a transcendent value on conversion such that the extermination of a whole people can not only be contemplated but embraced. Nonetheless, Aaron keeps asking questions: "might [it] have been better for all the savage races if the whites had never come at all?" (174). Although Father Bonifay (literally "good-faith"), who unlike the Presbyterians follows Catholic conversion practices that accommodate features of Indian culture, comfortingly affirms, "whatever pitiful human frailties we may have had, we brought to what you call the 'savages' the inestimable gift of the Holy Cross!" Aaron is not satisfied (174).²⁶ He remains, as his name connotes, Aaron Gadd (meaning, "gadding," "wandering" or "roving"), a seeker of the Light.²⁷

Notwithstanding the impressive range of evangelical views displayed in *The God-Seeker*, the novelist conveys their parochialism. He does this by drawing attention to the year 1848, when Aaron sets out for Minnesota, the very same year that Darwin worked on *On the Origin of Species* and Marx published his *Communist Manifesto*. Both works suggest particularly applicable contexts in Lewis's twentieth century, the first recalling the confrontation of modern science with a Bible-centered fundamentalism, and the second America's history

of labor unrest and, particularly, its mid-century confrontation with its chief rival, the godless Communists of the Soviet Union and their sympathizers.²⁸ The jolting juxtaposition reminds us of just how narrow, in the larger scheme of things, is the world view of the frontier missionaries. Yet, with impressive indirection Lewis illustrates how this insularity does not prevent an assertive brand of evangelical nationalism from its militant march, for it believes unreservedly in its ideals and knows nothing of its parochialism.

To bring home this last idea, Lewis recollects that 1848 was also the year that the United States brought to successful conclusion its “holy crusade of the Mexican War” (83). This notion of crusade Lewis develops with care by having the anxious missionary wife, Luna Speezer, ask whether in the aftermath of its victory over Mexico “we” Americans are going to take away the Minnesota Sioux lands west of the Mississippi (294).²⁹ Tying together these two signal geo-political events is Lewis’s Captain Pipman, the Seminole War and Mexican War veteran, who patronizingly responds, “Don’t you worry your lovely head. Stands to reason that the Government of these United Sates, a nation founded on the rock of freedom, ain’t going to rob and abuse a lot of unfortunate Indians—not without giving them a handsome present in return. That’s what we’re known for abroad; our strict justice to every race and condition of man” (294–95). The Colonel further justifies this American adventurism as “saving Mexico from the horrors of monarchy and Catholicism” (295). Burlesqued as this chauvinistic display may appear, the boast captures in one broad stroke the character of popular imperialist thinking and the pipedream of American innocence, American exceptionalism.³⁰

Similarly, the announcement near novel’s end that the newly promoted Colonel Pipman is marrying Huldah only appears to be a concession to the novelistic conventions of romance, for the marriage allows Lewis to hammer out with final emphasis the idea that America’s missionary faith entails an alliance between evangelical Christianity and evangelical nationalism.³¹ With Huldah as his naive apologist, Lewis concludes the section by having the God-fearing bride declare, “Oh, we in the army are the real pacifists, the real priesthood, and America is no longer led by the dollar sign, like in the old days, but by the sword and the cross, indivisible!” (382). In this deeper sense the marriage of the mission girl to the military man exemplifies the twin ideologies driving the imperial American project. Stated in terms of literary method, Lewis conjures up a Romance of the Republic for the sole purpose of unmasking an American imperialism that parades unexamined as idealistic Christian triumphalism.

This theme of evangelical nationalism, it is pertinent to recollect, Lewis first broached in 1927 when he depicted the revivalist preacher Sharon Falconer expansively declaring how she “was going to organize a new crusade—an army of ten million which would march through heathen countries and convert the entire world to Christianity in this generation.”³² This passage from *Elmer Gantry* suggests that when Lewis came to write *The God-Seeker*, he thought of his new novel not as an antiquarian research effort, but as a representation of an enduring American identity. The evangelical project of bringing to other lands the gifts of American civilization, we know, continued to expand through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a dominant feature of American foreign policy in its imperial phase.³³ In fact, the project that Sharon Falconer imagines, the Christianization of the whole world in a single generation, was precisely the aspiration that the ABCFM leadership had made its explicit goal in the early nineteenth century.³⁴ So too, Pipman’s vainglorious Christian nationalism was actually a nineteenth-century commonplace. Missionaries and many other lay Americans believed that America had a special destiny in the world. For instance, the Reverend John Codman, who delivered an annual sermon before the ABCFM, asserted that since “American Christians” have received by God’s grace both liberty and true religion, “*Patriotism* demands that, as we have freely received, we should freely give.”³⁵ “How can we better testify our appreciation of her free institutions,” he urged his listeners, “than by laboring to plant them in other lands? For, where the Gospel goes in its purity and power, there will follow in its train the blessings of civilization, liberty and good government.”³⁶

As a historical novelist Lewis also deserves credit for foregrounding the way a chauvinistic popular press helped justify the national mission to civilize and so to displace the Indian. The initiating circumstance occurs when Luna Speezer gives Aaron a popular magazine article she has clipped and exultantly insists that he show it to Black Wolf. Reading it, Aaron discovers that a traveler reports “in extensive detail” that the Western Indian nations, including the Dakota, “were idolatrous, lazy, dirty, improvident, murderous, adulterous and given to gambling and begging” (237). This yellow journalism prompts Black Wolf to reply with a manifesto issued in pamphlet form. This pamphlet chapter, unquestionably the most ridiculed in the entire novel, exhibits anachronism everywhere and its spirit is quite unhistorical.³⁷ Evidently Lewis could not resist the tactic of depicting white culture with the same contempt whites have used to depict Indian culture. For example, the first section, “Religion and Superstition,” describes

Christians as idolaters who believe in many gods. It asserts that Catholics believe in a Trinity that includes Mother Mary and accuses Protestants of believing in a four-god council comprised of Satan and the Holy Trinity. In addition Christians worship on a special day each week a pantheon of demigods including "saints, angels, seraphs, witches, fairies, vampires, evil spirits" and Santa Claus!—whereas Indians believe that every day and minute God "pervades every inch of space" (266–67). Continuing this inversion, the pamphlet depicts the white races as enamored of mass warfare, lying, and gambling, and given to a greedy commercialism that involves a form of persistent begging called "Advertizing" (269).

Compared to Indian arguments current in the 1840s, these are patently anachronistic. Yet they are a Swiftian tour de force, memorably vivid, and fill a gap in the public debates of the era by demonstrating how easily the perverse tactics of denigration and distortion that whites employed in depicting Indian culture could be applied as well to white culture. The function then of this chapter is polemical and hortatory rather than historical—a departure from Lewis's general mode of composing the novel. Nonetheless, Black Wolf's alienation and willingness to die for his cause, as he does, conforms all too closely to a historical pattern inasmuch as Lewis has Black Wolf shot and scalped by a rival tribe, here the Ojibwa, who, it is suggested, might have been put up to it by white interests, here the business interests of Cesar Lanark. Indian rebellion was, of course, commonplace, and the Dakota Sioux were no exception, as is demonstrated by the abortive, bloody uprising of Little Crow in 1862–63 against missionaries and soldiers, which ended by his being shot to death by white farmers.³⁸

Seen from a diachronic cultural perspective, the sections involving Black Wolf's critique of American ideology cut sharply across the American experience. A central passage is Black Wolf's warning, "when you make the big treaties and take all our western lands, we won't find it's worth living, to become second-rate citizens. . . . We're going to fight what you call Civilization and what all the other races call Slavery. . . . The Christians sing about bathing in a fountain filled with blood. They'll get it!" (306). This important speech associates prophetic Christianity, not with peacefulness, but with a thirst for bloody confrontation. Further, it links the civilizing mission of white America with the confiscation of Indian lands and the reduction of the Negro race (and Asians as well, really) to second-class citizenship. This latter issue then adumbrates the segregation and Jim Crow racism of Lewis's own time and leads with remarkable celerity to the re-emergence of Aaron's elder brother Elijah, the human rights missionary, who brings

The God-Seeker full circle, returning it to its frame story on the rights of the Negro and the destiny of America.

Structurally, Elijah functions as the last of three principled, judgmental father figures, the others being, as we have seen, Aaron's Calvinist father and Reverend Harge. While Lewis underscores the continuity by observing that Elijah looks "like John the Baptist in the dungeon" (384), the preacher's sudden reappearance signals a change in the progression. For Elijah is a union organizer and activist who will acknowledge "no covenant with God till he has released all suffering souls in prisons and slave-pens and Indian reservations, and houses of shame, everywhere in the world" (384).³⁹ This union radicalism, we notice, with its overtones of allegiance to the oppressed workers of the world had an obvious topical application in anti-Communist Cold War climate that produced the House on Un-American Activities (HUAC). With similar topicality, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) became the target of HUAC, which accused it subversively harboring Communists.⁴⁰ In this topically charged role, Elijah alerts Aaron, who has left the mission to marry Selena and become a representative middle-class figure, that he is in danger of becoming too caught up with material success to care about the grievances of others. Indeed, as part owner of a construction company, Aaron might become an oppressor himself. However, in response to his brother's advocacy, Aaron begins a labor union in his shop and becomes active in the Underground Railroad movement, as had his self-righteous father before him.⁴¹ In thus configuring this set of circumstances, Lewis discloses a vision of history in which the past continues to repeat itself, albeit with a difference. For the self-righteousness of the father in the early 1800s gives way to the humanitarianism of the sons in the early 1850s.

This pattern of ethical development also reveals itself among the ethnic immigrants who work in Aaron's construction shop. Primed to reject the hiring of the runaway Henry Oldham as a former slave worker, unwanted competitor, and outsider, the laborers nevertheless reverse themselves when Oldham's owner appears to demand that his "property" be returned to him under the regressive Fugitive Slave Act. In this manner Lewis registers his belief, rare in his earlier novels, in the fundamental decency of these ordinary laborers. If in this concluding portion of the novel Lewis succumbs to a roseate vision of America, his own *Romance of the Republic*, as it were, it is, I presume, because of Lewis's optimistic assessment of the prospects in his own time for a more just and inclusive America.

None of this should be taken to signify Lewis's belief that progres-

sivism is America's destiny; to the contrary, America's future is contingent and must be won through debate and struggle. This is the meaning of Reverend Rip Tatham's declaration as a progressive Unitarian that "we are witnessing a giant passion—the spectacle of America in search of a soul. The struggle may take another two hundred years" (391). Such contingency explains why Lewis wrote, and continued to write into his last years; he was trying to make a difference in the world.

In presenting *The God-Seeker* from these ideological perspectives, I have not claimed that it is a great forgotten novel; rather, I have been saying that *The God-Seeker* is a culturally important historical novel, well managed thematically and intellectually challenging. And I have, indeed, argued that many of its formal properties have been misunderstood. Most notably, while it frequently observes the outward forms of romance, it programmatically undercuts those forms with a disenchanting realism. Thematically, its greatest strengths inhere in its authentic historical perspectives and the power of its ideas about American identity.^s Moreover, as one of the few novels by a canonical author to examine critically the unintended consequences that came of the Christian missionary effort to evangelize the American Indian, it is culturally important as well. At the time of this writing when the United States has again ventured into foreign lands while preaching its gospel, if not explicitly of Christianity, then of universal freedom and democracy to older civilizations not always receptive to them, Lewis's treatment of America's missionary encounter with its own Native Americans provides a cautionary perspective.⁴² It even holds out the prospect of deepening our historical sense of America's evolving but persistent missionary identity. For all these challenging reasons, *The God-Seeker* deserves to be taken seriously; it deserves to be read.

Notes

¹ Reviewers and critics almost all panned the novel. Notable among them are John Woodburn, "Lament for a Novelist," *New Republic* 120 (May 16, 1949), 16–17, which appears in *Critical Essays on Sinclair Lewis*, ed. Martin Bucco (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), 77–78. See Bucco's introduction to this edition, 11, for an overview of critical responses. See also D. J. Dooley, *The Art of Sinclair Lewis* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1967), 228–30, and Martin Light, *The Quixotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis* (West Lafayette: Purdue Univ. Press, 1975), 130–33.

Negative assessments of Lewis's representation of American culture had already begun to appear even before *The God-Seeker* was published, and so the novel never got another hearing. See Maxwell Geismar, *The Last of the Provincials: The American Novel, 1915–1925* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), 105, Bernard De Voto, *The Literary Fallacy* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1944), 100–101, and Vernon L. Parrington, *Sinclair Lewis, Our Own Diogenes* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Book Store, 1930), 19–21. Elmer F. Suderman's "The God Seeker in Sinclair Lewis's Novels," in *Sinclair Lewis at 100: Papers Presented at a Centennial Conference*, ed. Michael Connaughton (St. Cloud: St. Cloud State Univ., 1985), 227–34, treats respectfully the theme of religious quest and suggests that *The God-Seeker* get a second look.

² Sheldon N. Grebstein, *Sinclair Lewis* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1962), 153–54, 67. Grebstein lists as tract-like novels *Elmer Gantry*, *Kingsblood Royal*, *The Man Who Knew Coolidge*, and *It Can't Happen Here*.

³ I allude to the title of Walter A. McDougall's *Promised Land, Crusader State* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), a study of the foundations and progress of an American ideology.

⁴ The classic book on the Dixiecrats is William D. Barnard, *Dixiecrats and Democrats; Alabama Politics* (Montgomery: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1974). On the war against Communism in the post-World War II era and before, see Richard J. Ellis, *To the Flag: The Unlikely History of the Pledge of Allegiance* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2005), xiii–xiv, 68–71.

⁵ See Anthony Easthope, *Literary into Cultural Studies* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), 55–61.

⁶ *The Oak Openings* in *The Works of James Fenimore Cooper*, Vol. 8 (1892; repr. New York: Greenwood Press, 1969). Hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁷ Sinclair Lewis, *The God-Seeker* (New York: Random House, 1949), 7. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

⁸ Richard Lingeman, *Sinclair Lewis, Rebel from Main Street* (New York: Random House, 2002), 525.

⁹ Lewis took the unusual step of writing an Appendix (419–22), providing an account of the historical persons that appear in the novel.

¹⁰ Ayako Uchida, "The Protestant Mission and Native American Response: The Case of the Dakota Mission, 1835–1862," *Japanese Journal of American Studies* 10 (1999), 159, 160, 162.

¹¹ Uchida (160), citing Riggs's unpublished papers from the Papers of the American Board Commissioners for Foreign Missions, deposited at the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

¹² Lyman Beecher, *The Bible a Code of Laws; a Sermon, Delivered in Park Street*

Church, Boston, Sept. 3, 1817 (Andover, 1818), 48. For an account of the sermon, see Clifton J. Phillips, *Protestant America and the Pagan World: The First Half Century of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1810–1860* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), 270.

¹³ Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Response, 1787–1862* (New York: Atheneum, 1972), 6, and Michael C. Coleman, *Presbyterian Missionary Attitudes toward American Indians, 1837–1893* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1985), 171. See also George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 1–20.

¹⁴ Coleman, 173.

¹⁵ The last phrase is Berkhofer's in *Salvation and the Savage*, 107–24.

¹⁶ Missionaries believed that they needed to learn the language of the natives to be effective. See Berkhofer, 49.

¹⁷ In 1676 Mary Rowlandson recorded the perfidiousness and superstition still evident among the “praying Indians” in *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*; in *Held Captive by Indians: Selected Narratives 1642–1836*, ed. Richard VanDerBeets (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1994), 75–76. For “backsliding” among the Dakota Sioux, see Uchida, 162.

¹⁸ Phillips, 86.

¹⁹ Stephen R. Riggs, *Tak-Koo Wah-Kan; or, The Gospel Among the Dakotas* (Boston, 1869), 104–10, and *Mary and I: Forty Years with the Sioux* (Chicago, 1880), 25–33.

²⁰ The attitude Lanark reports is familiar. Following the Little Crow uprising, Tinker reports, “the cry to exterminate all Indians in Minnesota grew to a furor” (97).

²¹ H. P. Whipple, Preface to Helen Hunt Jackson, *A Century of Dishonor* (Boston, 1888), v.

²² Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 779.

²³ Recorded in Schorer, 776.

²⁴ Schorer, 447–48.

²⁵ Lewis's account of women's tribulations on the frontier is good history. See Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992).

²⁶ On Catholic conversion practices from the seventeenth century, see William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), 15.

²⁷ On Aaron's being the "best" that America can produce, see James Lea, "Sinclair Lewis and the Implied America," *Clio* 3 (October 1973), 21–34, repr. in *Critical Essays*, 186–87. Assessments emphasizing Aaron as truth-seeker appear in Suderman, 231–33, and, with greater qualification, Edward Watts, "Kingsblood Royal, The God-Seeker, and the Racial History of the Midwest," *Sinclair Lewis: New Essays in Criticism*, ed. James M. Hutchisson (Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing Company, 1997), 102–03.

²⁸ *Elmer Gantry* addressed the evolution issue two years after the Scopes trial of 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee. Out of America's confrontation with its Communist enemies came the insertion of the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance in 1955. See Ellis, 124–39.

²⁹ Lewis observes that in two separate treaties the Minnesota Sioux were indeed "cajoled" to give up their western land claims in 1851 (392).

³⁰ Among the many pertinent studies are David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas, 1993); Andrew Kohut, *America Against the World: How We Are Different and Why We Are Disliked* (New York: Times Books, 2006); Charles Lockhart, *The Roots of American Exceptionalism: History, Institutions, and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and on Lewis's own time, Siobhán McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and U.S. Foreign Policy: Public Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

³¹ For a discussion of the missionaries as colonizers of what he calls the indigenous "middle ground," see Watts, 102–03.

³² Sinclair Lewis, *Elmer Gantry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), 214.

³³ However, evangelists such as William Jennings Bryan were isolationists as well as pacifists. See Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998), 34–35.

³⁴ Phillips, 233.

³⁵ John Codman, *Sermon [The Duty of American Christians to Send the Gospel to the Heathen]* (Boston, 1836), 14–15.

³⁶ Codman, 15.

³⁷ Woodburn, "Lament for a Novelist," in *Critical Essays*, 77, and Light, 131. Grebstein, 107, describes Black Wolf's "book" in a passage judging Lewis's novel to be "one of Lewis's worst and a strange potpourri." Dooley, 229, observes that

Black Wolf “seems to have read Mencken.”

³⁸ Uchida, “Protestant Mission,” 167–70. See also Riggs, *Mary and I*, 164–97.

³⁹ Sheldon Grebstein pointed out in “Sinclair Lewis’s Unwritten Novel,” *Philological Quarterly* 37 (October 1958), 400–409, repr. in *Critical Essays*, 127–36, that the material from Lewis’s unfinished labor novel wound up in *The God-Seeker*. This information has been adduced in support of the idea that *The God-Seeker* is a hodge-podge of incongruent material, but I seek to illustrate that its use is integral to Lewis’s vision of America.

⁴⁰ Lewis’s book predates Senator Joseph R. McCarthy’s rise, but not the challenges posed by HUAC, created in 1945. See Kenneth O’Reilly, *Hoover and the Un-Americans: The FBI, HUAC, and the Red Menace* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1983), 3–12, 168–93, and on HUAC’s investigation of the NAACP, 172–73. During this period the FBI kept a file on Lewis, and Lewis felt HUAC’s oppressive presence. See Lingeman, 511–15.

⁴¹ Although the model for these domineering father figures may have been Lewis’s own father, with whom the author had an impaired, fairly loveless relationship (see Schorer, 13–15, and Lingeman, 5–7), Lewis depicts Aaron recognizing that his spiritual inheritance issued from his abolitionist father, even as that inheritance lives on in a new way.

⁴² On the relationship between America as a “chosen people” and its project of bringing civilization to others, see Ellis’s discussion (216–21) of George W. Bush’s policy statements and their implications for empire. Garry Wills, *Under God: Religion and American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 81, traces the strong link between Protestant sectarianism and nationalism, citing a Christian Pledge of Allegiance used in sectarian schools, which begins, “We pledge allegiance to the Christian flag, and to our Savior, for whom it stands.” See also Michael D’Antonio, *Fall from Grace: The Failed Crusade of the Christian Right* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), 40–41.

