

Civil Religion in African-American Mourning Songs about John F. Kennedy



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Introduction

Civil religion is an important concept in the history of many countries. It was first used in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762), in which Rousseau asserts that neither Christianity, nor any other religion provides a solid basis for society. Paradoxically, he also argues that religion is of tremendous value when creating a state, since no successful state had ever been founded that was not based on religion (Rousseau 22). He argues that the solution to this paradox lies in the cultivation of a civil religion. This Enlightenment variety of spirituality offers a perfect alternative to regular religion since it does not exclude any religious denominations and therefore functions as a common social construct that unifies society.

Even though there has been extensive research since the 1960s looking at the phenomenon of civil religion, no agreement has been reached about an exact definition. At the core of the concept, however, is the idea that citizens imbue their nation with transcendent value. This is seen, for example, in national ceremonies, the veneration of the national flag, or respect for war heroes.

Civil religion also plays an important role in the history of the United States. Even in the closing years of the eighteenth century, shortly after the adoption of the Constitution of the United States, Founding Father Benjamin Franklin noted the presence of a collective faith in American society. He described this phenomenon as 'publick religion' (Butler, Wacker & Balmer 162). Some researchers stress that the constant recourse to religious images and symbols in American culture stems from the desire to understand its historical experience and national purpose (Butler, Wacker & Balmer 32). Other historians believe civil religion is simply a variety of political religion (Butler, Wacker & Balmer 162). Most scholars, however, agree that Americans generally see themselves as a chosen people who live in a nation guided by God – or, as Kenneth Wald puts it, a “nation with the soul of a church” (Wald 55).

The President of the United States functions as an important symbol in the culture of civil religion. As James Fairbanks states, many people glorify the President and praise him for his deeds (220). Many scholars also claim that, in the context of the culture of civil religion, the President is often seen as the saviour of the people. Martin Marty even argues that the President is the high priest of the United States since he alone guides the nation and therefore has the “greatest potential for invoking symbols of power” (Marty 151). This raises the question of the extent to which this attitude towards the President differs from hero worship. The answer is simple: praise for the President amounts to hero worship, but since he plays (or has played) a crucial role in the political history of the United States, the veneration for the President may be seen as a variety of civil religion (Marty 152).

Many concrete examples of civil religion can be found in modern-day American society. The American dollar bill, for example, contains the motto: “Annuit Coeptis”, which means: “He [God] oversees our undertakings” (Wolfe 4). Furthermore, many memorials, statues and monuments in the United States are devoted to important historical figures and former presidents, who are, as mentioned above, often regarded by the nation as saints. Examples of statues of this kind are the Wright Brothers memorial, Mount Rushmore and the Washington Monument.

Many of the general public’s responses to the death of John F. Kennedy on 22 November 1963 were also rooted in civil religion. A rise in this variety of civil religion was particularly apparent in the African-American population (Wolfe 23). This increase in the expression of civil religion in the black American population is remarkable because this group has, historically, been less prone to expressions of civil religion (Woodrum & Bell 365). Some researchers say this lack of interest in civil religion is related to the fact that African Americans have never had the chance to fully integrate into society (Woodrum & Bell 365).

Other researchers emphasise the role of religion in the lives of this section of the population. The latter argue that personal religion was, historically, the way for African Americans to experience a sense of unification. Black slaves, for example, were often given rudimentary religious help by their owners, then left to organise segregated congregations. As a result, African Americans had little interest in a collective American conscience (Genovese 45).

In the aftermath of Kennedy's death, however, many African Americans expressed civil religion, for example through songs. Dozens of black blues and gospel artists released one or more songs in which they expressed their feelings of sorrow and despair about the death of the President. These songs were often chart-topping hits that called for more affection for fellow human beings, peace and social change (Cooper 22).

Although there has been a lot of research looking at civil religion, the interaction between civil religion and African American music in the sixties has been neglected. This study therefore focuses on how civil religion is expressed in a selection of African-American songs about the death of John F. Kennedy. The next three chapters will be devoted to this. The first chapter will focus in particular on the question of how African-American artists express civil religious ideas in relation to the efforts and accomplishments of the Kennedy administration. The second chapter will be dedicated to the comparisons made between Biblical figures and the slain president. The third chapter looks at how these artists express civil religion when discussing the future of the United States after the death of the President. The final chapter of the study will summarise the findings, compare the analyses and arrive at a conclusion in which the research question will be answered. Suggestions will also be made for further research on this topic.

Chapter 1

Bread in a Starving Land:

Looking Back at the Kennedy Administration

The young President was very important for black people in the United States of the 1960s. Not only did he initiate the desegregation of the Universities of Alabama and Mississippi (Klarman 12), he also appointed many African Americans to important positions in the White House during his time in office. Above all, he introduced the Civil Rights Act, which was ultimately passed on 2 July 1964 under President Johnson. This act was a giant step towards full legal equality. The provisions of the Act included, among others, the outlawing of discrimination in public buildings and the protection of African Americans against discrimination in voter qualification tests (Klarman 14). Research by James D. Barber points out that, as a result, many African Americans saw president Kennedy as someone who “was more for the colored people than any other President” (117). However, given the small sample that Barber used for his research, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be representative for the general African-American population of the 1960s.

The veneration of Kennedy’s achievements during his time as president is an important theme in numerous African American songs. Furthermore, a large number of black singers look back at the Kennedy administration and hail its political accomplishments. Most of those artists specifically focus on the President’s support for civil rights. The general message of many of these songs – the idea that Kennedy was a saviour for the black people – is in line with what many scholars emphasise in their analyses of the role of the president in American civil religion. Kenneth Wald, for example, notes that Kennedy’s death was the beginning of a period in which Americans would honour a sacred symbol (38). The historian even notes that “the

discovery that Kennedy could take on a religious significance of the public provided further evidence that the nation is viewed in transcendent terms” (38).

In 1964 Sydney Harris and his band The Sunset Jubilee released the song “My Friend Kennedy”, which proclaimed not only that Kennedy adopted a strong position: “You fought a mighty good fight / And for every nation / You stood for the right” (van Rijn 112), but also valued liberal justice for every individual, including the African-American population: “He fought to make the goal / About the rights of freedom / For every, every living soul” (van Rijn 112). It could be stated that Harris and his band express civil religion by praising the efforts of Kennedy during his presidency: they want the listener to know that Kennedy fought for the rights of the people of his nation during his time in office.

Gospel singer Ollie Hoskens, who wrote the song “Assassination”, expresses civil religion in a similar manner. A large part of the song is devoted to the international mourning over the death of the President: “The world became a sphere of solitude and sadness, rich men / and poor men cried” (van Rijn 120). The key concept of this short song, however, is the idea that Kennedy put himself in the line of fire for the African-American population. At the end of the song, Hoskens says that Kennedy was not only “a man of honor” and “a man who had pride” (van Rijn 120), but also a man who valued the rights of African Americans: he “faced responsibility, had equality in his eye” (van Rijn 120).

A similar conclusion could be drawn about Brother Will Hairston’s song “Story of President Kennedy” (1964). The main argument of this hymn is the idea that the President offered his life for the people of his nation: “I said, hush, America, and don’t you cry / You know President Kennedy was born to die” (van Rijn 132). Like the other artists discussed above, Hairston expresses civil religion by setting the President on a pedestal for support for civil rights. According to the artist, the President was the one who could bring freedom to

Hairston and his fellow Americans: “He was almost to set United States free” (van Rijn 132). At the end of the song, Hairston specifically addresses Lee Harvey Oswald – Kennedy’s assassin – and uses a metaphor to voice how it feels to be an African American now the President is no longer there: “You killed our president; you know that was wrong / You killed my bread in a starving land” (van Rijn 133). The second line here takes the death of Kennedy to a more personal level, and in this respect Hairston differs from Hoskens and Sydney Harris and his band The Sunset Jubilee.

The famous African-American gospel singer Mahalia Jackson also sang about Kennedy’s death. Jackson was known for her emotive way of singing and how she interacted with her audience. She often managed to create a powerful sense of community during her performances and was well aware of the impact of her songs: “There’s something about music that is so penetrating that your soul gets the message. No matter what trouble comes to a person, music can help him face it” (Jackson & McLeod-Wylie 184). Civil rights played an important role in her musical career: she was one of the artists who sang about justice for African Americans at the March on Washington in August 1963, the event where Martin Luther King gave his famous ‘I Have A Dream’ speech (Dufour 45).

It is not surprising that she also dedicated a song to Kennedy’s efforts to emancipate racial minorities. On 29 November 1963, she recorded the song “In the Summer of His Years”. Like the other artists mentioned here, Jackson does not hesitate to put the President on a pedestal. Jackson portrays Kennedy as the ultimate leader of the United States, in a way that, as has been pointed out here, constitutes a form of civil religion. Her song says that hopes for racial equality ended for many African Americans when the President was shot: “A shot rang out like a sudden shout, and Heaven held its breath / For the dream of a multitude of men rode with him to his death” (van Rijn 123). She also refers to Kennedy in her song either as “a man

so blessed”, or as “a young man (...) with his head held high” (van Rijn 123) rather than by using more neutral terms, such as ‘the President’, or his name.

Finally, the African American Champion Jack Dupree also takes John F. Kennedy’s championship of civil rights personally. He released his song “School Day” in 1967, stressing his hard life as an African American and opposing it to the general social situation of white Americans: “I know you have hard times, but you don’t have times like me” (van Rijn 111). Dupree’s song ends by proclaiming the belief that there have only ever been two who have tried to emancipate him during their time in power: “Well, it wasn’t but two men in the world ever tried to free me / That was Abraham Lincoln and President Kennedy” (van Rijn 111).

It is remarkable, however, that these artists all hail the President in ways that express civil religion, but fail to take Kennedy’s shortcomings with regard to civil rights into consideration. Many historians who have studied Kennedy’s politics conclude that civil rights were not a key-priority for the young President. According to historian Edmund Ions, this lack of interest in the black community was related to the politics of the Cold War. As a result of the transatlantic tension between the Western and Eastern blocs, the President sought to preserve national unity in American society and considered polarisation as a result of desegregation to be undesirable (210). Researcher Taylor Branch claims that John F. Kennedy strongly opposed the introduction of a civil rights bill because he believed that it would not pass. More importantly, Branch claims that Kennedy feared that this bill would divide or even destroy the Democratic Party. It was only at the end of Kennedy’s first term that the civil rights of black Americans started to take priority over foreign relations (Branch 376-377).

Chapter 2

The Slain Messiah:

Biblical Comparisons with the President

Another group of African-American singers venerate the President but make specific references to passages and characters from the Bible. This group can therefore be seen as a subcategory of the artists described in the previous chapter.

As mentioned in the introduction, granting the President saintly status is common practice in the American culture of civil religion. Abraham Lincoln, for instance, is still viewed by many African Americans as the black population's Messiah since he was the first President to propose moderate solutions for slavery. According to sociologist Robert Bellah, the symbolic equation of Lincoln with the Messiah started early after his death (48). With the Christian archetype of the sacrifice of the Messiah for the benefit of mankind in the background, Lincoln was associated with the war dead and those who gave their life for the country for any other reason. According to Bellah, these analogies marked an important change in the culture of civil religion: "The theme of sacrifice was, from that moment onwards, indelibly written into the civil religion [of the United States]" (48).

A similar comparison can be found in the song "The Modern Joshua" by gospel singer Doris Ann Allen. As the title of the song already suggests, Allen compares Kennedy to the Biblical figure Joshua. The latter plays an important role in the Bible: God not only appoints him to succeed Moses after the latter dies, but also promises Joshua that no man will replace him and that no-one will leave or forsake him during his reign (*Josh.* 1:1-9.5). Because of this personal appointment by God, some religious academics note that Joshua may be seen as the second Jesus Christ of the Bible (Nichols 195). Joshua also plays a crucial role in the battle of

Jericho, which is described in *Joshua* 6:1–27. With God’s help, he and his followers manage to break down the defensive walls around Jericho and eventually take over the city.

The most prominent Biblical reference in Allen’s song relates to this event. She reshapes the battle to give it more contemporary relevance in the following lines:

We’ll march around hatred, around deceit,
Walls of prejudice, defeat,
The walls of ignorance, of fear,
The walls of bigotry and then love will appear
(van Rijn 147).

The problematic walls in this song symbolise the troubles of contemporary American society: the words ‘walls of prejudice’, ‘defeat’ and ‘ignorance’ clearly refer to segregation, racism and general thinking about the subordinate position of the African-American population. Most importantly, Allen stresses that Kennedy – the contemporary Joshua – was a heaven-sent saint who broke down the walls: “Oh, John Kennedy / Our modern-day Joshua, (...) He marched around the walls” (van Rijn 146). She therefore suggests that Kennedy helped America to tackle its troubles with racial minorities.

The African-American singer Peter Tillis, who wrote the song “Kennedy Moan”, is one of the many artists who draw heavily on the resemblances between the President and Jesus Christ. The singer focuses specifically on the Christ-like relationship between God and the President. Tillis, for example, expresses the belief that God was the ultimate orchestrator of the President’s death. He notes that the Creator foresaw the assassination and chose both Kennedy and Lee Harvey Oswald as the protagonists of the national drama: “In Nineteen Hundred and Sixty-three, Just as God would have it to be / The man went out in Dallas, Texas, He was a shot by a sniper, was a boy suspected” (van Rijn 122). Furthermore, the singer notes that the Lord

always kept an eye on the President while he served the nation: “God watched us / While he served our people well” (van Rijn 122), just as He did in the Bible when Jesus Christ helped the people around him.

Blues guitarist James Brewer mainly refers to the Biblical idea that Jesus Christ travelled the country to perform miracles and to spread the word of God. He compares this to the efforts of the President. He notes, for example, that Kennedy went “throughout the country, serving every woman and man” (van Rijn 117). Brewer again equates the President with Jesus Christ at the end of the song. The singer remarks that Kennedy was able to perform miracles: “I remember, when he first took the seat / Well, jobs began to open up, work turned out so neat” (van Rijn 188). Though the singer does not explicitly compare Kennedy and Christ, his attempt to portray Kennedy as the modern-day Jesus is nevertheless clear.

Singer Mary Ross, on the other hand, points out the resemblances between Christ and the President more explicitly than the other artists discussed here. The lyrics of her song “President Kennedy Gave His Life” are largely devoted to a comparison between the Messiah and the slain President. She stresses, for instance, that Kennedy “Like Christ, gave his life” (van Rijn 148) for the people he served. Furthermore, she notes that God not only chose President Kennedy as the new Jesus, but also put a message in his heart and in his hand: “God gave him the message to pass on, to the people of his land” (van Rijn 148). This idea closely parallels the relationship between God and Jesus as described in the Holy Bible, which likewise involved the spreading of God’s messages through a human being. The song ends with a clear-cut comparison between Kennedy and Christ. The singer stresses that both died not of sickness but because they were brutally killed by mankind: “Jesus died on the Calvary Cross, with nails in the palms of his hands / The president died with a bullet in his head that was made by man” (van Rijn 148).

Like Mary Ross, the African-American singer Johnnie H. Robinson makes a direct comparison between Kennedy and Christ. He wrote the song “Assassination of the President”, which was released in 1964, specifically comparing the assassination of the President with how Jesus Christ died. He notes that Christ was violently whipped up a hill by a group of soldiers before his crucifixion: “What you wanna say? / When they whipped Him on up the hill, / Yes, they did” (van Rijn 149). Robinson then switches back to the 1960s and continues describing how Kennedy drove into Dealey Plaza, only seconds before he was shot in the head: “The man was riding down the street in a long black car / Oh, wasn’t it sad?” (Van Rijn 149).

The Bible clearly plays an important role in these selected African-American songs. The prominence of Christianity is in line with the general tradition of Black- American music. Since the earliest days of slavery, Biblical tales were central to many black songs and spirituals. Songs about God and the Bible were sung throughout the day: at work, during rest time, and on Sundays (Gates Jr. & McKay 8). These hymns served as community-building shields against the slave-owners, and often voiced the feelings of the oppressed African Americans (Gates Jr. & McKay 8). For centuries, Old-Testament heroes and prophets such as Jesus, Noah, Samson, Daniel, Job and Joshua often reappeared in African-American spirituals and myths (Brown 47). These figures were not only celebrated but also used to personify the troubles of contemporary slave-based society. It is no surprise that the songs about Kennedy from the mid-sixties discussed here still refer to Biblical events, since the Christian faith was deeply rooted in the African-American society of the 1960s. More than eighty per cent of all religious African Americans were Christians during this period, and so were many musicians (Glaude Jr.144).

Chapter 3

One Nation Under God:

Future of the Chosen Nation

A third category of African-American artists draw specifically on the idea that the United States is closely connected to God. Many scholars argue that the supposed connection between God and the American people is strongly linked to American civil religion. Researchers Jon Butler, Grant Wacker and Randall Balmer note that civil religion symbolised a desire to place the United States in a larger framework of significance. They argue that it is “an attempt to say that America occupied a special or even unique place in God’s plan for the world” (162). Even Abraham Lincoln referred to a transcendent relationship between God and the United States in the famous Gettysburg Address, reaffirming that the United States was created under God and reminding the Union that they had the spiritual resources to win the Civil War: “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” (Lincoln 34).

Many African-American artists were concerned about the future of their nation after the death of the President. The discussion about civil rights had reached its climax in the year of Kennedy’s death: in May 1963, Kennedy announced to his cabinet that he was directing the Department of Justice to draft the Civil Rights Bill, which he eventually sent to Congress on 19 June of that same year (Oppenheimer 645). The sudden loss of the President led to a strong feeling of despair among the African-American population. Many African Americans feared that the death of the President could endanger the passing of the Civil Rights Act. Research on this topic even pointed out that at least 67% of the black population felt so confused and upset that they did not know what to feel after the death of the President, whereas only 38% of white

Americans felt the same (Kirkham & Sheldon 156).

The Southern Bell Singers was one of the groups who released a song that both addresses the grim future of the nation and the transcendental relationship between the United States and the Lord. Their song “The Tragedy of Kennedy” starts with a detailed description of the assassination and the hospitalisation of the President: “Well, they rushed him to a hospital, only five minutes away, / People standing in the lobby, and they didn’t know what to say” (van Rijn 128). The singers then voice their initial reaction after hearing about the assassination of Kennedy and cry for the help of God now that the States lack leadership from the Kennedy administration: “Lord, God Almighty, what we poor peoples going to do?” (van Rijn 128). The lyrics, however, do answer this question a few lines later. The Southern Bell Singers say that Americans can find hope for a better country by staying true to the Christian faith: “Keep our mind on Jesus, for he’s a president too” (van Rijn 128). The general message of the song is therefore not only that the citizens of the United States are closely connected to God, but also that that prayer will be the solution in times of national distress.

The Dixie Hummingbirds, on the other hand, dedicate their song “Our Prayer for Peace” to the slain President and claim that God can help re-build a disordered society by changing the minds of the American people. The song sums up a list of requests to God. They first ask God to teach Americans “how to love each other / (...) every creed, Lord, and every color” (van Rijn 113). They also want God to let every man know “that it is a sin / to hate his brother because of the color of his skin” (van Rijn 113). They then continue with the lines “guide our mind and tongue, Oh, keep our hand, oh Lord, please, don’t let our hands do anything wrong” (van Rijn 113). The first half of the song eventually ends with the message: “Father, let all of this hatred cease / Let us all live down here together / Lord, let us all live in peace” (van Rijn 113). The Hummingbirds do not necessarily stress that the United States is

a divine nation, but they do draw on the idea that God has the ability to speak directly to the American people.

The evangelist singer Rosie Wallace calls for American unity in a similar way in a gospel song entitled “Take Courage” in November 1963, only days after the death of Kennedy. Blues and gospel historian Guido van Rijn interviewed Wallace about this song in 2005. Wallace remarked that Kennedy “was a good president. (...) and was conscious of the needs of people who are below the line of the middle class. (...) I am sure he had help in his administration, but he was great” (van Rijn 115).

Wallace’s song, however, does not refer directly to the efforts of the Kennedy administration. Like other artists discussed here, she mainly invokes the idea that God has a special relationship with the people of the United States. To strengthen this message, she stresses the idea that the United States is supervised directly by God, who has “blessed our country to be strong and brave” (van Rijn 115) and reminds her fellow-Americans that – as a result of this sanctification – their country had never been enslaved or been defeated by other countries. She believes that this transcendental relationship between the nation and God will also help the citizens of the United States to overcome their grief about Kennedy’s death. Americans should therefore be strong in the faith of God and continue to walk “hand in hand behind those who are brave” (van Rijn 115). The importance of this firm belief in God is already underlined in the opening passage of the song, when Wallace directly quotes from the Biblical passage Isaiah 40:31: “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength / They shall mount up with wings as eagles / They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (van Rijn 114). As in the songs discussed in the previous chapter, the influence of the religious negro spiritual also seems to resonate through Wallace’s work.

Conclusion

Many African-American artists adopt three different approaches based on civil religion when paying homage to their President. Some African-American singers express civil religion by hailing the accomplishments of the Kennedy administration. Most of these singers specifically stress the political progress made by the United States at that time with regard to civil rights. Other artists portray the president as a heaven-sent Messiah and make clear-cut comparisons with passages from the Bible. Finally, there are artists who invoke the idea found in civil religion that there is a relationship between God and the United States. They ask the Creator for help in building up the United States again after the loss of the President. In other words, their works demonstrate that lyrics are apt to reflect the myths of civil religion.

It is noteworthy that the influence of spirituals often resonates through the lyrics discussed in this study, suggesting that African Americans in the 1960s took their musical and cultural heritage into consideration while writing their songs. The artists discussed also show that songs are an excellent medium for the expression of concerns about the future in times of national distress.

All in all, it is important to note that the role of Kennedy in civil religion acquired significance through the work of these African-American artists, even though President Kennedy was not always an unequivocal supporter of civil rights for the African-American citizens. Although the findings should be interpreted with caution, it could be stated that the results of this research give some insight in the both the role of civil religion, as well as the role of Christianity in the African-American culture of the 1960s.

This study has focused primarily on how African Americans express civil religion. An investigation is still required to examine how white Americans express civil religion in the pop songs released shortly after Kennedy's assassination. It would be useful to compare the two groups to see whether there is a difference between the ways they approach the death of the President.

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