Statement of Research Interests
Adam Gómez

I am interested in the phenomenology of politics, the ways that individuals experience politics, and the ideological frameworks through which they navigate the political world. My research focuses on the ways that political actors and ordinary citizens understand politics, how they think about it and what it means to them, and the rhetoric that they use to persuade one another. To this end, I am interested on the one hand in the development of national identity, for example, what it means to think of oneself as an American at a given point in history. On the other hand, I am interested in the intersection of religious and political thought, as many groups and individuals draw their ethical, anthropological and even ontological assumptions from their religious beliefs and heritage, which in turn structure their political understandings. At the same time, political beliefs and categories importantly shape religious belief and practice, so that in practical terms it can be difficult to distinguish where the political ends and the religious begins. It is my belief that this area of overlap between these two categories is where much of politics take place.

My dissertation, *The Nation Invisible: American Civil Religion and the American Political Tradition, 1838-1925*, reflects these interests. In it, I argue that civil religion is an influential aspect of American national identity, structuring Americans’ sense of the national telos and the liberties, obligations and prohibitions that are believed to derive from it. I present American civil religion as a rhetorical tradition that describes the United States as having a particular relationship with God, akin to that described in the Old Testament as existing between God and the ancient Israelites. While other scholars have considered the form and content of this tradition, this project is interpretive in approach, and to my knowledge is the first study to base its claims in a detailed engagement with civil religious texts. Thus, I provide a richer account of this tradition, with a fuller analysis of its content than that present in earlier studies. The tradition of American civil religion links American politics to metaphysical questions of ultimate political and religious import, including the relationship between liberty and equality, the nature of sin and of virtue (both inside and outside of the national community), and the role of the United States in world history. These tropes of public speech are more than mere rhetoric, as they work to structure American self-understanding and in this way exercise a deep influence on American politics.

An important difference between my work and the great majority of scholarship on American civil religion is the fact that it is more aligned with the legacy of Max Weber than it is with that of Émile Durkheim. My dissertation emphasizes the ways in which beliefs influence political action over the ways by which they separate in-groups from out-groups. While I address both questions, with special attention to issues of race and gender, American civil religion is much more than a means of demarcating insiders from outsiders. For Americans, it is a way of thinking about their relationship as a people to their political ideals, which many Americans have historically invested with the force
of religious belief. The language of civil religion points to the ways that Americans have answered the basic political questions of who they are and what they should do.

While this language provides tools with which political actors can mobilize support, it also works to commit them to particular programs of action, and to speak and act in a religious mode. Taking into account social, political, and theological influences, I examine in detail the speech of four pivotal figures in the development of American civil religion: John L. O’Sullivan, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and William Jennings Bryan. My dissertation is organized with a chapter on each of the above four men, except for Lincoln on whom I write two chapters, following the typology of Max Weber as adapted by Martin E. Marty by dividing his speech into priestly and prophetic strains. I structure my examination of the civil religious framework of each of these men within three primary questions. One, does the individual prioritize liberty over equality, or vice versa? Two, where does he locate sin, and what is his understanding of that sin? Three, does he believe that the United States is obligated to model democracy to the world, or that the nation has a responsibility to actively proselytize democratic government?

Each figure considered in my dissertation answers these three questions in different ways, and their answers are important for the politics of our time as well as that of their own, as the thought and language of each of these men have had an impact on American self-understanding in important and enduring ways. For example, it is Lincoln’s location of sin within the American polity, which he understands to be covenanted with God to demonstrate to the world the possibility of political equality, which drives him to urge the nation to forgiveness and reconciliation in his Second Inaugural Address. John L. O’Sullivan, on the other hand, locates sin exclusively beyond American borders, and thus sees the United States as destined by God to redeem the world from tyranny by spreading democratic liberty across the globe. Wilson synthesizes Lincoln and O’Sullivan’s arguments: like the former (whom he describes in messianic terms as “a font of living water”) he views America as a covenanted community, and believes this covenant to legitimate increased coercion at home. This covenant, however, along with its coercive enforcement, are in the service of the same global crusade for democracy that O’Sullivan described, as Wilson like him locates sin outside of the United States. Bryan, finally, locates sin within the United States, but importantly not among Americans: he deploys the Manichean conflict between good and evil, familiar from Wilson and O’Sullivan before him, within American borders, as virtuous ‘real’ Americans, primarily the white rural poor, confront utterly corrupt and un-American elites, who work against the equality that Bryan, like Lincoln, believes to be the teleological endpoint of American politics.

In this way, and unlike any other study before mine, I engage with American civil religion substantively and reveal it to be a coherent and dynamic tradition of belief. This tradition is with us still: it is no accident that Martin Luther King invoked Lincoln’s prophetic language in his “I Have a Dream” speech, which called the nation to account for its failures and hypocrisies. Nor is it coincidental that George W. Bush, in his 2003 State of the Union address, justified the invasion of Iraq by saying that “Americans are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity”, all but quoting Wilson’s justification for American involvement in World War I. Though my dissertation looks to the 19th and early 20th centuries, my intent is to provide the resources for us to understand the America of today, as the themes and tropes explored in my dissertation even now shape the way that Americans think about themselves and their place in the world.
I am currently revising my dissertation for publication as a book. My article “Deus Vult! John L. O’Sullivan, Manifest Destiny & American Democratic Messianism” (a revision of my dissertation chapter) will be published in the Fall issue of *American Political Thought*, and I will shortly submit a revision of my Wilson chapter for publication.

Other future projects include two articles. The first will argue for the usefulness of the Augustinian conceptualization of sin for contemporary political theory, drawing on the political thought of Abraham Lincoln, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Carl Schmitt. The second, which I am writing in collaboration with my colleague Antony Lyon (of UC San Diego’s Humanities Program), will argue for the place of gratitude among the highest political virtues.

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