

## ***Evangelist of Incarceration? Billy Graham as Symbol for the Religious Problem of Mass Incarceration***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper looks at Billy Graham as a symbol for a platonized Christianity that gives birth to and maintains the social problem of mass incarceration. I suggest Kelly Brown Douglass's analytic of platonized Christianity provides a way of seeing Billy Graham as a symbol of this religious tradition. I unpack Billy Graham lying in state in a casket built by inmates as an intersectional symbolic representation of a platonized Christianity (Graham), politics (Capital Building), mass incarceration (casket), and the divinization of whiteness (Apotheosis of George Washington on the ceiling of the Rotunda). I draw upon selected sermonic moments of Graham propagating law and order rhetoric as a criticism of the strategy of civil disobedience during the civil rights movement. I argue Graham's embrace of law and order politics, helped lay the foundation for the social "solution" of mass incarceration, and his lying in state is a symbol of this legacy.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the wake of the passing of prominent evangelist Billy Graham, it was announced that he would be laid to rest in a casket built by inmates of the Angola prison of Louisiana, a request made by his son, Franklin Graham in 2006. For many Evangelicals, and for Billy Graham himself, this is understood to be a gesture of redemption and grace for those who are incarcerated, symbolized through Graham's request to have the names of the inmates who worked on the casket's construction be wood-burned onto the coffin.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it was also announced, that the prominent evangelist that many have described as "America's Pastor," will lie in state in the U.S. Capital Building in the center of the Rotunda. This "honor" has only been bestowed upon 33 other people in the history of the United States; a list that includes mostly presidents, congressmen, and military officials. This paper analyzes Graham's lying in state as reflecting how his public ministry, particularly his public embrace of Nixonian law and order rhetoric, is interwoven with the Civil Religion of the United States and the necropolitical life of the prison industrial complex.

### **WHAT IS CIVIL RELIGION?**

I turn briefly to the work of Charles Long and his definition of American Civil Religion, as well as to frame the historical emergence of Billy Graham. Long describes civil religion **[open quote]** "as that which offers salvation within the context of belonging to the American National Community, he contrasts this with revealed religion which offers human salvation to all human beings regardless of circumstance."<sup>2</sup> **[closed quote]** Furthermore, Long identifies what he terms as "mythic cycles," that culminate in violence which present the national community the

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<sup>1</sup> Three inmates -- Richard "Grasshopper" Leggett, Clarence "Mr. Bud" Wilkerson and David Bacon -- had the special assignment. Of the three, only Bacon is still alive. He was paroled in December 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Long, Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion," P. 149. In Long's Elipsis he distinguishing the between the Anglo-Saxon version of civil religion and the New Orleans version. This essay is critiquing the Anglo-Saxon version.

opportunity to break from the repetition of reinforcing its national mythology. These cycles are one-hundred year periods of time, which he periodized as; 1776-1860s, and from the 1860s until the civil rights movement of the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> During these critical junctures Long claims **[open quote]** “the American revolution is aborted and clever priests of our national language and apparatus, skillful in the ways of ritual purity and manipulation, come upon the scene to ensure the repetition of the American ritual.”<sup>4</sup> **[Closed quote]**

I aver that Graham functions as this clever priest who aborts the “American revolution” through his public critiques of the civil rights and black power movements, particularly post 1965 Watts Rebellion, ensuring the continuance of the ritual of domination, thus keeping the nation bound to its civil religion. The Cold War context in which Graham emerges and catapults him to fame crafted and promoted a political theology where, according to Sylvester Johnson the imperial ambitions of the United States were understood as being rooted in **[open quote]** “moral virtues, ultimate principles, and religious authority,”**[closed quote]** unlike the idolatrous political ambitions of the Soviet Union which is rooted in tyranny and oppression—it was the United States moral duty to act against Russia.<sup>5</sup> Graham partly understood the rise of Communism as a judgement from God to bring a wayward United States back into repentance and right relationship with God. Graham fits with Long’s descriptor of the “clever priest” who was “skillful in the ways of ritual purity and manipulation.” Cold War tensions, anti-New Deal barons of industry, and Conservative Evangelicalism created a perfect storm for a Christian nationalist political theology which would be narrated by Graham during the Post WWII period.

The image of “America’s Pastor” laid to rest in a casket built by incarcerated people, while lying in state within the U.S. Capitol building that First Lady Michelle Obama famously and accurately stated was “built by slaves,” with the Apotheosis of George Washington in the foreground, serves as an illustration of Billy Graham as symbol of the civil religion of the United States. His casket rest within the intersection of a popular mode of platonized Christianity, politics, the divinization of whiteness, and incarceration, Graham becomes a kind of symbol for a mode of U.S. civil religion that reinscribes its power while denying its implications with the death dealing mechanisms towards people of color. In other words, the very people who constructed Graham’s casket, like the slaves who built the capital building are exploited for their labor and through their outsider status craft national understandings of citizenship. Yet, the death dealing mechanisms of their essentially free labor in constructing the casket is denied, couched within the rhetoric of redemption, similarly as U.S. political rhetoric couches its various forms of imperialism in the name of democracy. Graham’s casket is an authorizing text, legitimating the nation state, the military, and a death dealing interpretation of Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

### THE CAPITAL BUILDING AND THE ROTUNDA

The *Apotheosis of Washington* lies at the center of the Rotunda’s ceiling in the Capital Building 180 feet from the floor. Washington is depicted as looking down from the heavens surrounded by white angelic beings, depicted as “god”, sitting in the posture of Jupiter above the powers of heaven.<sup>7</sup> Around the wall of the Rotunda are nineteen carved friezes that render an American exceptionalist narrative of American history. Of the nineteen scenes in the frieze, eleven commemorate Anglo-Saxons expanding their territory at the expense of Native Americans and Mexicans; eight present battles and wars; and none acknowledges or depicts slavery or African-Americans, and the overall message celebrates the conquest of two continents—Mexico and what

<sup>3</sup> Long, 152.

<sup>4</sup> Long, 152.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, 331

<sup>6</sup> Here, expound on what I mean by an authorizing text.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Gardella, *American Civil Religion: What Americans Hold Sacred*. P. 137

would come to be known as the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Washington as “god” from his heavenly perch, looms over various dignitaries that the proponents of U.S. Civil Religion deem worthy to bring into his presence for their acceptance by Washington into the afterlife. The *Apotheosis of Washington* curates what Kelly Brown-Douglass describes as an “*ontocracy*”—a situation where the pattern of society is identified with the immemorial order of the cosmos.<sup>9</sup> Religion provides legitimation to an established social order with a sacred canopy by presenting the social order as a reflection of God’s eternal order giving the social order “eternal stability.”<sup>10</sup> Within American Civil Religion, a threat to the social order, is viewed as an affront to God. According to Brown-Douglass, the two sacred canopies that provide legitimation to the social order as American Civil Religion are exemplified by both Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, and the religious canopy of Protestant Evangelicalism. The Jeffersonian and Franklin sacred canopy according to Brown-Douglass, is **[open quote]**“not about Christianity, it was about the sacred nature of Anglo-Saxonism, which would become known as American Civil Religion...in many aspects Anglo-Saxonism was their religion.”<sup>11</sup> **[closed quote]**The second sacred legitimation according to Brown-Douglass is the Protestant Evangelical canopy forged in the work of Johnathan Edwards.<sup>12</sup> The casket of Billy Graham in the Rotunda serves as an exemplar of the convergence of these two sacred canopies that give life to American Civil Religion.

Washington as a “god” at the top of the Rotunda sits in approval of Graham’s service to the country as Graham holds onto the sacred text of biblical scripture within his casket. But what type of interpretation of scripture is Graham holding onto that provides the conditions of possibility for Washington to approve of his service to the nation? America’s Pastor through his embrace of what Kelly Brown-Douglass has termed “Platonized Christianity”, receives approval from Washington as Graham’s theology and political activity affirmed and gave life to U.S. domestic and international power building and dominance, while his Evangelical Universalist social ethic<sup>13</sup> diluted the calls for structural change and regulated any forms of societal improvements in the area of race relations to interpersonal relationships, while keeping oppressive societal structures in place. In fact, Graham’s blessing of U.S. imperial policy was not confined to the pulpits, but was expressed at the highest level of statecraft, Graham’s theology fused with the interest of U.S. international political and military interest during the Cold War period. The confluence of the

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<sup>8</sup> Gardella, 139.

<sup>9</sup> Brown-Douglass, 59

<sup>10</sup> Brown-Douglass, 59. Douglass is drawing from the work of Peter Berger and his text *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, pg.5.

<sup>11</sup> Kelly Brown-Douglass, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, P.12. Furthermore Douglass remarks, a free black body is dangerous because it supposedly threatens the social order (69) important: “a free black person contests the notion that the world as it is the way that God ordained it to be. A free black body literally points to the possibility of a different cosmic order.” (69), a free black body poses an ontological danger to an anglo-saxon exceptionalist social order (the need for mass incarceration). “As chattel the black body remains in its constructed space, lives into its created nature, does not disrupt the order of things, and is under the control of white people; therefore, it is not dangerous. The moment the black body is no longer chattel and thus free, it becomes dangerous.” (70)

<sup>12</sup> Brown-Douglass, P.14 Ashon Crawley remarks Johnathan Edwards as important because of the correlation of his classic sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” with the New York slave insurrection. “Johnathan Edwards is important for this discussion because of the legendary place he holds as an American imaginary of religious intrigue. His famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” is thought to have been preached in response to the “New York City Plot” wherein negroes were charged with setting fires in the city and burglarizing in 1741....the sermon was a direct reflection of the general paranoia and worry about the capacity for black radical resistance to enslavement practices, given the fact that no white person killed during the insurrectionist episode.” P.14

<sup>13</sup> This terminology comes from Stephen Miller, and communicates a theology that understands social change beginning at the level of the human heart, therefore, it does not engage in structural change as a primary engagement for societal change—if at all.

agendas of the anti-new deal movement, titans of industry, and the global competition between the United States and the Soviet Union provided the context for the Neo-Evangelical Post World War II version of imperial religion. Scholar of religion, Sylvester Johnson avers that, **[open quote]**“The result was a distinct shift in the nation’s religious culture whereby Christian nationalism functioned to promote an explicit form of evangelical fundamentalism exemplified by Graham.”<sup>14</sup> **[closed quote]**

Graham was a symbol for and the primary curator of, what Johnson describes as “the presumptions of American civil religion—purporting that revivalist Christianization and aggressive US militarism were twin episodes of divine will—began to function as common sense. And those who opposed this imperial vision of religion seemed inexplicable, bizarre, or veritable enemies of the United States.”<sup>15</sup> Malcolm X put it more pointedly describing Billy Graham as a “Minister of White Nationalism,” as Graham’s theology gave legitimacy to the military-industrial-complex through his endorsement of U.S. wars against the dark peoples of the earth, primary expressed in his support for the Korean and Vietnam War abroad and his embrace of law and order rhetoric at home.<sup>16</sup>

The casket that houses Graham’s body was built by inmates from Angola State Prison, it was built through free labor, by those bound up within the nations prison-industrial complex. Angola Prison was purchased in the aftermath of slavery by a major in the Confederate Army and until this day resembles a slave plantation. Eighty percent of the prisoners are African-Americans and are under the surveillance of armed guards on horseback, they still work fields of sugar cane, cotton and corn, for up to 16 hours a day. The Rotunda and the Graham’s casket are concretely linked to each other. Graham’s encasement in such a coffin can be seen almost as a sacrifice to the “god” of American Civil Religion, George Washington, a sacrifice rooted in the logics and reality of free labor as building up the economic power of the country, a central component of the cultic practice of U.S. civil religion. The names on the casket represent a sacred legitimation, a sacred covering, onto and over the racial exploitation that is the prison system of the United States. The images of American colonial dominance depicted throughout the Rotunda, where dark flesh is conquered by whiteness, is a symbolic expression of the process of sanctification for adherents to U.S. Civil Religion.

In a disturbing symbolism, Washington can be understood as welcoming Graham into the heavens with a “well done my good and faithful servant.” Graham encased in a casket built by “new slaves,” provides George Washington his life’s testimony as to why he should be accepted in Washington’s white American heaven. The ritual of Graham’s funeral lying in state, coupled

<sup>14</sup> Sylvester Johnson, *African-American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy and Freedom*, P.329

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, P. 332.

<sup>16</sup> What made Graham’s message “white nationalism” to Malcolm was that the evangelist consistently focused on issues of individual faith and private morality a la white interest—selectively omitting white racism and white supremacy as sins from which God was calling men to repent. To be sure, Graham had preached against race prejudice, a sin that anyone could commit. But he did not see racism in the larger context of white supremacy nor was he willing to challenge systemic white racism in any significant manner. ...Billy Graham was interviewed on a New York television broadcast urging that Malcolm X “be watched very, very closely Malcolm and the Cross, Decaro Jr., 207. The author makes the claim that Malcolm was following Billy Graham’s evangelistic methods, while clearly disagreeing with Graham’s message. Malcolm called Graham a “white nationalist” in Graham’s classic Ballot or the Bullet speech. The author states, “Malcolm studies Graham closely, and he perceived that what the evangelist was preaching, though generally touted by Christians as “the simple message of the gospel,” was actually a message that conformed to the requirements of white supremacy.

with his body in a casket built by new slaves, and George Washington depicted as “god” are mutually reinforcing logics as Graham reinscribed the power of the *ontocracy* of the nation breathing life into American Civil Religion.

### BILLY GRAHAM’S SCAFFOLDING FOR MASS INCARCERATION

Billy Graham’s public theology during the 1960s, reproduced a political theology that undergirded the Cold War and came to have negative consequences for the long black freedom movement through his rhetoric of law and order. Carceral studies scholars are in general agreement that law and order rhetoric was a key contributor to the formation of mass incarceration, rhetoric that Graham embraced and propagated within his sermons.

Graham’s propagation of a platonized nationalistic Christianity situated within the Cold War informed his anti-communist and Southern regional commitments, bringing Graham into personal relationship with FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and Richard Nixon, both of whom were active antagonists towards the long black freedom movement. These relationships moved Graham to publically embrace the critique of the black freedom movement, helping fuel his law and order rhetoric. According to historian, Stephen Miller, Graham’s longstanding relationship with Richard Nixon is expressed in his key role as a part of Nixon’s “Southern Strategy,” as Graham helped consolidate political power for Nixon in the South, which ultimately informed Evangelical political activity in the Southwest and Western United States.<sup>17</sup> Theologically, Graham as a proponent of platonized Christianity offered what Miller has termed a “*politics of decency*,” which consisted of a belief that legally constituted authority was divinely ordained and that respect for law and order was a moral obligation. Graham’s commitment to the Southern Strategy was codified at Nixon’s inauguration, as Graham used the racial dog-whistle of the nation needing to confront “crime, division, and rebellion.”

Billy Graham’s rhetoric of crime division and rebellion at Nixon’s inauguration was an outgrowth of his public theology which held to the divinely sanctioned law and order of society. Several sermons given by Billy Graham illustrate his deep embrace and propagation of law and order rhetoric as a way of controlling and curtailing the black freedom movement, I will cite only a few here for the sake of time. One such sermon is titled, “**America is in Trouble**,” (1967) where Graham proudly proclaimed that Supreme Court Justice Huff Black challenged the constitutional right for people to protest in public spaces, Graham stated, **[open quote]**“its high time to challenge the assumption...that groups that think they've been mistreated have the constitutional right to use the public streets, building, and property to protest whatever, wherever they want without regard to whom it may disturb...the crowd moved by noble ideas today can become the mob ruled by hate, passion, greed, and violence tomorrow. Indeed! The crowd of yesterday has already become the mob of today.” **[closed quote]** Additionally, in his 1967 sermon “**Rioting or Righteousness**,” Graham stated, **[open quote]**“There is no doubt that the rioting, looting, and crime in America have reached the point of anarchy,” and the nation needs “*new tough laws*” to deal with “subversive elements that are seeking the overthrow of the American government.” **[closed quote]** Additionally, in a letter to President Johnson “Americas Pastor” wrote, “The American people are going to show their displeasure by the ballots they cast. The majority of the American people want law, order, and security in our society.” I highlight these sermons to illuminate Billy Graham as one of the primary public shaper of the white Christian backlash to the Civil Rights and Black Power movement, as historian Michael Long notes, **[open quote]**“[Graham] taking the occasion of the urban riots, as well as the emergence of the Black Power movement, too call for the end of all demonstrations.”<sup>18</sup> **[closed quote]**

<sup>17</sup> Stephen P. Miller, Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South.

<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Michael Long notes, “As a leader of the white Christian backlash, Graham sounded the alarms about the threats made by Black power advocates, giving all of his attention to fear mongering and none of it to

Graham's embrace of law and order rhetoric had electoral consequences. Theological Ethicists Rima Veseley-Flad illustrates, Nixon's law and order presidential administration influenced the election of Republican governors, who began a massive onslaught of prison building. Furthermore, prison populations were higher in states where a larger percentage of the population was identified as conservative and where greater numbers of residents were fundamentalist Christians.<sup>19</sup> Law and order rhetoric was central to Graham's political partnership with Nixon, and as Graham was the primary shaper of Evangelicalism in the Post WWI period, he thus informed the framing around law, crime, and punishment, which ultimately was codified in the rise of the religious right. Graham should not be seen as synonymous with the Religious Right, as he did not fall squarely into their camp, but he did provide the architecture for their emergence. Furthermore, the emergence of mass incarceration cannot be squarely confined to white political activity, as religious and political elements within black communities jumped on the tough on crime bandwagon in the 1980s, as James Foreman's brilliant work *Locking up our Own* demonstrates.

Returning to the work of Brown-Douglass, she highlights the constitutive nature of black unfreedom as tied to American Civil Religion. The status quo being imbued with a sacred assurance, when threatened is construed as a violation of the sacred cosmos. Brown-Douglass states, "for inasmuch as a social structure in which white people subjugate black people is viewed as a reflection of eternal law, then God must be a white supremacist....for blacks to become free is both a violation of their nature as chattel and an intrusion into white space....a threat to the status quo is regarded as an affront to God"<sup>20</sup> Billy Graham's propagation of law and order functioned as a part of his role as the clever priest to ritually cleanse the nation from the rebellion of the Long Black Freedom Movement.

## CONCLUSION

Billy Graham is a symbol for American Civil Religion as he offered salvation as a part of belonging to the U.S. national community. He did this domestically through his propagation of law and order rhetoric, as well as internationally through fusing Post WWII Neo-Evangelicalism with goals of U.S. capitalism and international military priorities couched within a theological rebuttal of communism. His embrace of law and order, rooted within a Puritanical understanding of the fixed order of society, his anti-communist commitments, and theological commitments provided the framework for him coming into conflict with the long black freedom movement and wanting it curtailed via state suppression. Graham, by lying in state and being buried in a casket which is the byproduct of a society investing in locking people up versus social investment, comes to symbolize the constitutive nature of a theology that demonizes the flesh and embraces imperial logics.

During the period of the Cold War, particularly during the period of the 1960s, the most prominent evangelist in the United States were Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr, and Billy

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the movement's ongoing attempts to correct structural racism and discrimination. Finally, true to his evangelical roots, Graham attempted to undermine the movement by continuing to shift his followers' attention away from structural issues, emphasizing instead his ongoing conviction that what ultimately mattered was the transformation of the individual heart and the local, interpersonal acts of kindness that flowed from a heart imbued with the Spirit of Jesus Christ." P.141

<sup>19</sup> Rima Veseley-Flad, "The Social Covenant of Mass Incarceration: Theologies of Race and Punishment." P.555. Veseley-Flad is drawing here from Harold G. Grasmick, "Protestant Fundamentalism and the Retributive Doctrine of Punishment." (Get exact Journal name) Vol.30, no. 1 (1992):21-45. I also think it is important to note, that the birth of mass incarceration cannot be only reduced to a "conservative moment." What Naomi Murakawa illustrates for us are the ways in which liberal reforms attempting to curb police violence and sentence inequality, actually helped fashion stronger and thus more aggressive police departments as well as harsher sentences and increased numbers of prisoners.

<sup>20</sup> Brown-Douglass, P.60

Graham. Both X and King came to embrace their Golgotha moment through their commitments to prophetic religion. Graham, however, furthered the moral legitimacy of the dominance of the United States and turned his back to his Golgotha in preference for the U.S. Capital Rotunda.

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