

The National Day of Mourning: Thanksgiving, Civil Religion, and American Indians

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the invention and development of the National Day of Mourning as a counter-tradition to Thanksgiving and its “conservative” civil religious symbolism during the late 1960s and 1970s. As part of the liturgical calendar of the American civil religion, the “First Thanksgiving” is strongly anchored in the nation’s memory. However, this civil religious myth of intercultural harmony has been increasingly questioned since the Red Power movement. Overall, the National Day of Mourning is a powerful example of the political potential of holidays, of competing interpretations and functions of civil religion, as well as of negotiating memory and identities in a multicultural society such as the United States.

My people have grown weary of hearing the songs of Thanksgiving [...]; of looking back at the first winter when the white man came singing songs of praise to a white man’s God who had blessed the new experiment in the “bleak wilderness” [...]; of a celebration that can speak over and over again of a great tradition and a great nation “born under God” for the good of all mankind and that can turn men’s hearts and minds to years of building a great American dream without turning their hearts and minds to the blood and death upon which that dream was built. (West 33)

In 1974, James L. West (Cheyenne tribe) published an emotional article in the *New York Times* vividly describing the feelings of American Indians on Thanksgiving. Instead of thankfulness, the national holiday stood as a reminder of an “attempted genocide”—it not only “excludes us [but] in fact attempts to emasculate us” as it celebrates “the death of my people!” Rather than giving thanks for the bountiful harvest and celebrating God for his guidance and the “blessings of liberty” he has bestowed upon the American nation since the landing at Plymouth Rock (Eisenhower, “Proclamation 3036”), American Indians mourn the conquest of their native land, their dispossession, and their displacement. In short: To American Indians Thanksgiving does not symbolize a story of inclusion and sovereignty but a story of exclusion and invisibility.

The autumn holiday is a central part of the liturgical calendar of the so-called American civil religion, which will be discussed in the first part of the article. It started as a regional, New England tradition and became a national holiday during the second half of the nineteenth century. Today it is annually observed on the fourth Thursday in November with a traditional family feast, parades, football, and church services. Presidents, politicians, and religious leaders regularly remind Americans of their “sacred” colonial heritage and the “First Thanksgiving” shared by the Pilgrims and “their new Indian friends” (“Southland” B1; Truman, “276”).

However, while the “First Thanksgiving” of 1621 is firmly fixed in the nation’s “collective memory,” this civil religious myth of intercultural harmony has been increasingly questioned since the Red Power movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. As sociologist James W. Loewen explains, “[m]ore than any other celebration, more even than such overtly patriotic holidays as Independence Day and Memorial Day, Thanksgiving celebrates our ethnocentrism” (Loewen 85). Hence, this article focuses on the critical discourse around the holiday and the invention and development of a countertradition, the National Day of Mourning. This tradition stands as an antithesis to Thanksgiving and its inherent White Anglo-Saxon Protestant civil religious symbolism. Moreover, its counternarrative features an empowering message of resilience and a call for inclusion in the nation’s imagined community, which still resonates in debates over sovereignty and reparations and actually operates well within the nation’s civil religion. Essentially, the article deals with the question of how civil religion can work both as a tool of social cohesion and of voicing dissent. In doing so, it addresses the question of memory sovereignty: Who is entitled to speak for the past and whose version of the past is remembered?

Civil Religion and U.S.-American Holidays

Thanksgiving and the Pilgrim myth are central components of the nation’s civil religion. Yet while there is an extensive array of scholarship on civil religion in general¹ and on the history of Thanksgiving during the nineteenth century (Siskind; Pleck; Adamczyk; Wills; Baker), studies on the holiday in the second half of the twentieth century and its civil religious symbolism are rare (Brennen; Weiß 193-270).² Similarly, virtually nothing has been written about how American Indians deal with the holiday or how American Indians relate to American civil religion.³ Quite to the contrary, scholars such as Matthew Dennis focus on Columbus Day as a day of protest for American Indians during the 1990s while portraying Thanksgiving as an “occasion for quiet home or community celebration” (Dennis 112-13).⁴ The present analysis of the late 1960s and 1970s proves the opposite and

¹ This article does not attempt to solve the continuing debate on the existence and/or definition of civil religion. Rather, it discusses how the concept is related to memory and public rituals as well as to minority groups and protest culture. For a historiographical (though partly outdated) overview, cf. Mathisen; Angrosino. For an interdisciplinary discussion, cf. Richey and Jones; Hammond, Porterfield, Moseley, and Sarna; Lüchau; Bungert and Weiß.

² For example, in her monograph on Thanksgiving Diana K. Appelbaum only dedicates nine pages to the history of the holiday after 1945 (255-64).

³ Vine Deloria’s 1992 essay on how civil religion relates to religious freedom of American Indians is the only scholarly work that explicitly deals with civil religion. In general, studies on minority groups and their relationship to American civil religion are rare (see Long; Howard-Pitney).

⁴ An exception is a chapter in Karen C. Cooper’s book (121-30). However, while Cooper deals with the National Day of Mourning, the evolution of the day in the 1970s is only covered on one page as she focuses on developments in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

serves as a much earlier example of American Indian protest against holidays and their symbolism.

Civil Religion and Collective Memory: A Redemptive Heilsgeschichte

In his influential 1967 essay “Civil Religion in America,” Robert N. Bellah describes the close intertwining of religion and politics in the U.S.-American public sphere and argues for the existence of a civil religion that is structurally differentiated from the state and the church (Bellah, “Civil” 1). Defined as “a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality [...] revealed through the experience of the American people” (12), civil religion links the nation’s past, present, and future within a transcendent framework. It augurs the United States and its government a divine origin, mission, and protection by partially drawing on Enlightenment values, the Puritan heritage, and Judeo-Christian symbols and rituals. For example, it refers to biblical archetypes such as the Chosen People and incorporates events and persons of U.S. history into a religious framework, for instance by treating the American Revolution as the Exodus of Egypt and the Declaration of Independence as a sacred text, highlighting the values of democracy, freedom, and equality under God.

Overall, civil religion can fulfill three functions: First and second, it can legitimize political agendas and can construct and maintain an integrative national identity. Yet, as part of the hegemonic political majority, civil religion tends to exclude minority groups. With regard to the United States, there is a tendency “to identify a particular constellation of Americans (traditionally white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxons) as the exclusive representatives of a uniquely American community of righteousness” (Angrosino 253). These two functions of civil religion form the nation’s nostalgic “conservative memory,” downplaying differences and celebrating unity.

In contrast, civil religion can assume a third, prophetic and critical function. Here, civil religion operates as a moral backdrop against which the actions and goals of the prevailing interest groups are measured. This function constitutes the critical “critical memory,” which can compete with the “conservative memory” in the public discourse.⁵ Thus, when used as a tool to voice dissent, civil religion can undermine its first and second functions. In contrast to Bellah, I do not subscribe to the concept’s normative-prescriptive use, but instead understand civil religion as a dynamic, fluid construct reacting to changing historical and political circumstances as well as national self-perceptions. Bellah envisions civil religion as a normative “panacea” that can right past wrongs such as slavery and the displacements of American Indians (see Bellah, “The New”; Bellah, *The Broken*). However, there is not one national civil religion that transcends all local, regional, ethnic, religious, class, or gender boundaries—rather, civil religion is adaptable, especially in times of sociopolitical crisis, which becomes evident when analyzing the Red Power movement.

⁵ On the distinction between a “conservative” and “critical” version of civil religion, cf. Marty; Wuthnow 244-62; Kao and Copulsky 132-35.

Ultimately, this fluidity explains the coexistence of multiple and potentially rivaling interpretations of civil religion within a society. As sociologist James Mathisen asserts, civil religion “continues to offer more than one vision of American history and experience that Americans never may perceive with a single eye. [...] American civil religion is a river with an identifiable current, but with more than one form” (Mathisen 140).⁶ Nevertheless, this does not mean that its symbolism is arbitrary or that there is an infinite number of civil religions. Rather civil religion is a historical (re)construction of a nation’s history that sets limits to its symbolism.

As such, civil religion’s myths, rituals, and symbols are central to U.S. commemorative culture.⁷ Through myths, history is given a civil religious framework as

a set of religious beliefs and ultimate values wrapped in, with, and under the political ideals [...] In it, national life is apotheosized, national values are religionized, national heroes are divinized, national history is experienced as a *Heilsgeschichte*, as a redemptive history. (Herberg 78)

The national holidays express, reflect, and annually spread this *Heilsgeschichte*. As one of the primary means of “organizing” memory, rituals “entail the repetitive use of emotionally charged symbols in symbolically significant locations at symbolically appropriate times” (Kertzer 92). Besides reflecting memory, holidays also actively shape it. Therefore, memory (like civil religion) is related to its sponsorship, i. e. the “official memory” of political elites and the “vernacular memory” of ordinary people or, in this case, minority groups. While the former seeks to secure social unity, the latter can challenge the status quo (similar to civil religion’s critical prophetic function) (cf. Bodnar 13-16).⁸

Regarding the symbols, myths, and rituals of Thanksgiving, which will be dealt with in the next section, it seems that elites have secured their status quo. However, as anthropologist David Kertzer explains, “in highly stratified societies, elites must work hard to foster symbolic systems among people whose experience insidiously undermines them. [...] They can never eliminate all loose ends, all contradictions in the symbols themselves, nor all vestiges of alternative symbol systems” (Kertzer 176-77). The Pilgrim myth offers many loose ends.

Thanksgiving and the Pilgrim Myth: Genesis and Development

The evolution of Thanksgiving is a prime example of Aleida and Jan Assmann’s concept of “cultural memory”: The holiday was purposefully established and ceremonialized and “at its core are mythical events of a distant past which are

⁶ Even rivaling civil religions refer to a generally agreed upon but multivalent frame of reference. One example is the civil religion of the South, which has developed a specific symbolism that is characterized by the “lost-cause” mythology of the Civil War. It has developed its “own” rituals such as the Confederate Memorial Day, its pantheon of heroes and martyrs such as Confederate general Robert E. Lee, and its own symbols such as the Confederate flag (see Manis; Remillard).

⁷ For an overview on myths, symbols, and different forms of memory see Erll. With regard to U.S. history see Thelen; Bodnar; Glassberg, “What.”

⁸ “Public memory” is the difference between (1) and (2).

interpreted as foundational” (Erl 28). Likewise, as anthropologist Paul Shackel notes in his anthology *Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape*, there are three ways to control the past—and all three overlap in the case of Thanksgiving: Memory can be about forgetting a past, about creating or reinforcing patriotism, and about developing a sense of nostalgia to legitimize a heritage (Shackel 3; see also Glassberg, “Public”; Lowenthal).

Thanksgiving has secular as well as religious origins. Until the 1860s it was mostly a regional holiday celebrated along the east coast.⁹ Finally, after a twenty-year campaign by writer and journalist Sarah J. Hale, Thanksgiving became a nationally celebrated holiday. As novelist and editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (one of the leading nineteenth-century women’s magazines), Hale urged her readers to celebrate the day “as an exponent of our republican institutions” since it symbolized the “true” American identity (qtd. in Dennis 90). Additionally, she wrote dozens of letters and petitions to politicians. In a letter to President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 Hale asked, “[w]ould it not be a great advantage, socially, nationally, religiously, to have the day of our American Thanksgiving positively settled?” (qtd. in Dennis 90). To Hale, especially in times of crisis like the Civil War, praying for national unity was paramount when asking God for guidance.

Hale’s campaign proved successful. After the victory at Gettysburg in October 1863 Lincoln officially declared Thanksgiving a holiday, as “a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father.” The president also used the holiday declaration to emphasize his political vision of national unity “under God.” Historian Elizabeth Pleck pointedly summarizes:

By having Lincoln as its midwife, Thanksgiving [...] celebrated the blessings of American nationhood [...] and became] a holiday of American civil religion, that is, religious belief in the national purpose and destiny. The nation, it was believed, was blessed by God and given a special purpose in the world. (Pleck 776)

Since 1863, all presidents have proclaimed Thanksgiving and in doing so, have reminded their fellow Americans of the political and religious ideals rooted in colonial times. Closely tied to these religious ideals is the so-called “Pilgrim myth,” which was rediscovered in the early nineteenth century in a description of the autumn fest of 1621 in a letter by Edward Winslow, a member of the former colony. In 1841, writer and antiquarian Alexander Young publicized the letter and named the event the “First Thanksgiving,” although Winslow had never used the term (cf. Young 230-38). In the footnotes accompanying Winslow’s letter, Young explained, “[t]his was the first Thanksgiving, the harvest festival of New England. On this occasion they no doubt feasted on the wild turkey as well as venison.” Besides this, it remains unclear to what extent Young’s decision to publish the letter was related to the ongoing American Indian Wars West of the Mississippi or to the internal tensions of the antebellum period in general.

⁹ The American Thanksgiving has its origins in both the secular British Harvest Festival Home and traditional religious days of fasting. Yet it is not clear when and where the “first” Thanksgiving actually took place in the New World (records show that several were held before 1621 but these had no impact on the Pilgrim myth).

In turn, the “end” of the American Indian Wars at the end of the nineteenth century was one of the main reasons for the fast circulation of the “Pilgrim myth.” Moreover, a general wave of nostalgia leading to a reinvigorated patriotism at the turn of the century, as well as the Americanization campaigns during the immigrant wave between 1880 and 1930, played a significant role in spreading the myth, in which the Pilgrims provided a model of the “good immigrant” (cf. Kammen 200, 410; Siskind 177-83; Pleck 778-84). Ultimately, Young’s publication promulgated a romanticized and simplified version, which every child came to know by heart: In 1620, a band of European settlers crossed the Atlantic on the *Mayflower*, landed on the east coast and founded the colony of Plymouth. One year later, they invited the “friendly” Indians to celebrate Thanksgiving.

By the time shortly before the Red Power movement, the “Pilgrim myth” was a popular story firmly embedded in the nation’s “collective memory,” as exemplified by a sketch published in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in 1955 (see fig. 1).



Figure 1: “Faith of Our Fathers—A Story of Thanksgiving.”
Chicago Daily Tribune 24 Nov. 1955: 1. Print.

Under the heading “Faith of Our Fathers—A Story of Thanksgiving,” the reader sees the central stations of the Pilgrim story told by a grandmother to her grandchild: The Pilgrims came in 1620 in search of religious freedom in the New World. The winter was cold, half of them died, and yet they worked hard and held on to their faith, “and their faith sustained them.” With the help of the “friendly Indians” they organized a feast the next autumn. “We celebrate Thanksgiving today because of these brave people. They kept the faith, and their faith made them strong,” explains the grandmother.

The Pilgrims’ spirit was mainly defined by a strong belief in God—and it was this belief (and not the American Indians) that helped the Pilgrims to survive. Accordingly, in 1947 the *Washington Post* described the voyage of the Pilgrims as follows:

Certainly His blessings have been made increasingly manifest to this Nation since the day when the early settlers of New England fell on their knees in their gratitude to Him.

God had been good to those pioneer Pilgrims. Armed with a great faith, they set forth across a providentially quiet sea; after many days the new continent came in sight, and it turned out to be the land of Canaan ("It's").

Similarly, presidents in their proclamations and religious leaders in their sermons have annually reassured Americans of their divine protection, divine aid, and divine guidance (cf. Truman, "'Proclamation 2673"; Eisenhower, "Proclamation 3077"; Kennedy; Johnson, "Proclamation 3627"; Dole A18; Walker 1; Thrapp, "Southlanders" A1+).

Through civil religious symbolism, the American nation came to be "imagined" (to use Benedict Anderson's term) as inseparably intertwined with a transcendental power and Thanksgiving (in addition to Independence Day) became the central ritual of the American civil religion. Civil religious references regularly renew and reaffirm the nation's "holy" heritage and the Pilgrims are the symbolic epitome of American values and morals. Thanksgiving is "a full-fledged ritual re-enactment of an origin myth of the nation" (Siskind 182), the first "true" American event, an American version of the biblical Abraham and Sarah with Plymouth as the locus of the national genesis and the Pilgrims as its "sacred progenitors" (Hodgson 185; see also Dennis 83). Yet while the narrative and symbolism of the "First Thanksgiving" forms a core part of the national imagination and identity, to American Indians it has always been a Barmecide feast. Eventually, during the Red Power movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, American Indians challenged this civil religious "spirit of 1621" calling for both a revision of the myth and the prevalent imagination of national origins, as well as for ethnic inclusiveness and a more flexible civil religious liturgy.

The National Day of Mourning: "If George Washington Was the Father of this Country, Pocahontas Was Its Mother"

As the Red Power movement and its drive for tribal sovereignty and self-determination "redefined and revitalized Indianness" (Nagel 234; see also Smith and Warrior; Smith), the "conservative" civil religious rituals and symbols of Thanksgiving became one of its prime targets of criticism. Because the holiday celebrates the beginning of the process of conquest and dispossession, which the Red Power movement sought to rectify, it was turned into one of the first platforms of (symbolic) protest. Surprisingly, it is (if at all) only mentioned in passing in literature on the Red Power movement.

A Counter-Tradition Is Born

The protest on Thanksgiving began with an event that galvanized native and non-native public attention unlike any previous ones: the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969. By dramatizing the historic and present injustices against American Indians, the nineteen-month-long occupation from November 1969 to June 1971 became the defining moment heralding the beginning of the Red Power movement. During

the occupation, on Thanksgiving 1969, hundreds of American Indians gathered on the Island and declared the day as “Un-Thanksgiving” (Arnold 32).¹⁰ On the same day, over six hundred American Indians from fifteen tribes performed the traditional Pow-Wow at the American Indian Center in Chicago in order to raise awareness of their culture, which, according to the organizers, had been more than “just corn” (Francesa Veltri [Apache and Tarscan tribes], qtd. in Sneed 23).¹¹

Although no “Un-Thanksgiving” celebration took place on Alcatraz the following year, American Indians in Plymouth started a new tradition, which has since been annually observed: In 1970, the year of the 350th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims, the National Day of Mourning was born, and right from the beginning it was specifically designed to be an anti-holiday celebration, an anti-climactic prelude to the traditional procession in Plymouth from Plymouth Rock to the two historical churches, Church of the Pilgrimage and First Parish Church, and the Pilgrim Hall (cf. UP 46; UPI, “12,000” 4; Burks 1, 28). Hence, the day is the typical expression of a counter-memory, which usually starts with localized experiences (cf. Lipsitz 213; Foucault 139-64; Hodgkin and Radstone). Moreover, in contrast to an “invented tradition,” the National Day of Mourning does not attempt “to establish continuity with a suitable historic past” (Hobsbawm 1). Rather, understood as an “inverted tradition,” it challenges this continuity and contests the dominant narrative. While it performs the same functions as an invented tradition, such as fostering social cohesion of the group (in this case of American Indians) and legitimizing their status, it inverts the traditional symbols and interpretations and thereby endows subaltern groups with agency.

It all began when the Massachusetts Department of Commerce withdrew its invitation to Frank James, a local Wampanoag music teacher and president of the Federated Eastern Indian League (an association of the eastern tribes), to hold a speech in honor of the 350th anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims. James had sent copies of his speech to the organizers in advance, and, in the speech, he did not forecast a glorious future but criticized the historic stereotypes associated with American Indians and their contemporary poor living conditions. After weeks of protest he finally held the speech as a symbolic gesture—not as part of the official celebration but in front of the Statue of Massasoit, the Sachem of the Wampanoags who in 1621 had “welcomed” the Pilgrims (cf. Lepore; Mandell), standing on Cole’s Hill overlooking Plymouth Rock.

Organized by the United American Indians of New England (UAINE), a Native American activist organization founded by James for the protest, over two hundred American Indians from over twenty-five tribes and their supporters gathered around the statue and listened to his speech. James recounted the capture and enslavement of American Indians as well as the broken promises regarding land ownership. While to the general public Thanksgiving is a time for reflec-

¹⁰ Since 1975 “Un-Thanksgiving Day” is annually celebrated on Alcatraz (see “Alcatraz”). On the occupation of Alcatraz see DeLuca; Johnson, T.

¹¹ With traditional clothes, songs, craft work, food, and prayer, the Pow-Wow emphasizes tradition, pride, and self-esteem and heightens the feeling of intertribal unity. It also shows the tensions of loyalty to the tribe and to the U.S. nation (see Ellis, Lassiter, and Dunham; Lawlor).

tion, a celebration of “the beginning for the white man in America,” American Indians look back “with [a] heavy heart.” And still, despite the long history of dispossession and of portraying American Indians as “savage, illiterate, uncivilized animal[s] [...] our spirit refuses to die.” In a rousing speech James called on his fellow American Indians to reunite, to “stand tall and proud” in order to “work towards a more humane America, a more Indian America” so that American Indians would also be able to “celebrate in the concept of a beginning”—a new beginning of “a new determination for the original American: [for] the American Indian [...] to regain the position in this country that is rightfully ours” (James qtd. in UPI, “Indian” A1).¹²

To American Indians Thanksgiving symbolizes a “cultural trauma,” as it has left “indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 1). And yet it is striking that so far the literature on trauma has nearly exclusively focused on the Holocaust and has only very seldomly been adopted to discuss the experiences of indigenous groups.¹³ By inventing the National Day of Mourning American Indians attempted to transform their cultural trauma into a national trauma, i. e. they sought to transfer their experience of dispossession, displacement, degradation, and marginalization into the nation’s collective memory.¹⁴ At the same time, as James’ speech vividly shows, American Indians framed their role in their traumatic past not solely as that of victims but also as survivors, in an empowering story of resilience. Hence, the National Day of Mourning stands for both the recognition of past injustices and the recognition of American Indians as the “first” people and actors in their own right.

In the first year, American Indians expressed this new determination to regain their position (at least symbolically) soon after James’ speech, when a small group climbed the (recreated) Mayflower II anchored in the harbor near the statue and tore down the English flag. Afterwards, the protesters painted Plymouth Rock red and buried it in several inches of sand (“Mourning” 26). The last symbolic attack (by an unknown party) on the elaborate granite canopy housing Plymouth Rock had taken place 70 years earlier (cf. Doss 361). As a “star of everything bad that has happened to the American Indian” the symbol of colonial rule was symbolically buried (Gary Oaks [Mohawk tribe], qtd. in “Mourning” 26). Russell Means, Oglala-Sioux and first national director of the American Indian Movement (AIM), was also present at the site and powerfully announced: “Plymouth Rock is red. Red with our blood. The white man came here for religious freedom and denied it to us. Today you will see the Indian reclaim the Mayflower in a symbolic gesture to reclaim our rights in this country” (Means qtd. in “Mourning”

¹² The speech is also printed online (United American Indians of New England) and excerpted in Cooper 123-24.

¹³ For example, the anthology *Mapping Generations of Traumatic Memory in American Narratives* features no chapter on American Indians (Mihăilescu, Oltean, and Precup; see also Neal). Exceptions are three chapters in the anthology *Trauma and Resilience in American Indian and African American Southern History* (Parent Jr. and Wiethaus) by Kidwell; Zulick; and Tayac. For indigenous groups in Australia see Hamilton.

¹⁴ On how slavery became part of America’s collective memory, see Eyerman.

26).¹⁵ In retrospect, Means described his speech as “the most impassioned I [have] ever delivered” (Means 178).

Means was the movement’s most identifiable figure, who was very skillful at encouraging the news media to report on such events. AIM, founded in 1968, deliberately planned such “performances” to alert potential protesters and to gain public attention. While historians Daniel Cobb and Bradley Shreve have rightly pointed out that the Red Power movement did not begin with nor is synonymous with AIM, within the context of the protest culture around Thanksgiving, AIM’s tactics were the driving force to challenge the powerful origin myth surrounding the holiday. Hence, the demonstrations on Thanksgiving spearheaded by AIM, fit into the general protest culture of the early period of the Red Power movement that followed after the first National Day of Mourning, such as the “symbolic occupation” of Mount Rushmore in 1972 and the siege at the village of Wounded Knee the following year.

By directly attacking Plymouth Rock, a central civil religious symbol, and thereby reclaiming the “first” landing, American Indian activism became more visible as it reminded the public that along with its celebrated religious heritage came responsibility, which the nation had not lived up to. These “performances” not only brought AIM “more national exposure,” as Means noted in his autobiography twenty-five years later (Means 178); the protest on Thanksgiving was also an attempt to preserve their cultural identity and to reintegrate American Indians into the national imagination by adding their perspective.

The following year, the Plymouth-Provincetown Celebration Commission (founded for organizing the 350th anniversary) met with descendants of the Wampanoag and various members of the Indian Program at Harvard University to answer, as the official report noted, “the criticism posed at the Thanksgiving Indian protest in 1969 and 1970, when it was said that the Indian role in Thanksgiving and in the Pilgrim adventure has never been given the recognition it deserved” (Plymouth-Provincetown Celebration Commission 67). In the following pages, the Commission praises itself for planning various events for 1971 that would integrate American Indians, such as Indian concerts, a Pow-Wow, Sabbath services with readings in phonetic Algonquin, and an Indian speaking forum (Plymouth-Provincetown Celebration Commission 67-74, 80). And yet the forum sparked some controversy. After the presentations on American Indian history and the present situation, criticism was (again) voiced by Frank James, who had attended the forum. Probably in an attempt to steal the protesters’ thunder, the official report of the Commission applauded the exchange of arguments and pointed out that James’s statement (which was later published in several national newspapers) actually reflected the Commission’s goals: to create an awareness of the American Indian, to promote American Indian unity, and to “shatter the untrue glass image of the Pilgrims” (Plymouth-Provincetown Celebration Commission 78).

Despite the Commission’s plea, the November gathering continued in the following years and UAINE formalized the event as other tribes joined. In 1972 the British flag of the Mayflower was again torn down and this time replaced by a blue flag with a tipi in its center (UPI, “Indians” 5; “Thanksgiving” 2). On the same day,

¹⁵ On the symbolism of Plymouth Rock see Arner; Seelye.

the flag of the Wampanoag flew on the Capitol in Washington, DC (Library of Congress), which was handed over to the Wampanoag Chief on Thanksgiving 1973. The following year, as a reaction to the ongoing criticism, the Plimoth Plantation—a historic reenactment site where actors portray how the Pilgrims lived—for the first time since its founding in 1947 employed an American Indian and started its ongoing Wampanoag Indigenous Program (Plimoth Plantation; Brennan).

As the national media reported extensively in support of the American Indian cause, the general public took notice and also voiced criticism. In a letter to the editor published in the *New York Times* in 1972, one citizen criticized President Richard Nixon's recent Thanksgiving proclamation for only emphasizing divine protection without mentioning the help of the American Indians in 1621. However, "these American Indians were indeed acting under direct guidance of God, [...] they were truly agents of the Lord." And yet the nation had not been thankful to them but instead had stolen their land, desecrated their religious symbols, and thus, started a "war on God." Now, the writer exclaimed, was the time to pay back "our" debt (Sholes 34; Nixon).

Accordingly, the National Day of Mourning not only triggered a heightened awareness of the indigenous contributions to U.S. history but also highlighted the current situation of American Indians. A headline in the *New York Times* in 1976, the year of the Bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence, noted that the "first Americans" had become the "last Americans" (Wicker 23). Two years later, Daniel Webster Custalow, Chief of the Mattaponi Reservation in Virginia and a strong advocate for treaty rights, explained in the *Washington Post* that without the help of the American Indians the Pilgrims would never have survived and now the American Indians needed their help. Chief Custalow intentionally invoked the civil religious hero Washington: "Where would the country be today without corn, beans and tobacco? If George Washington was the father of this country, Pocahontas was its mother" (Custalow qtd. in Henry 3).¹⁶

Despite their activism, by the late 1970s, American Indians were still one of the most disadvantaged minorities in the United States: They had the lowest per capita income, the highest unemployment rate, and the worst health and housing conditions (Center for World Indigenous Studies). The invention of the National Day of Mourning had sparked public interest and had created a heightened awareness in the 1970s. However, in the 1980s its message and meaning was turned upside down when President Ronald Reagan acknowledged American Indians on Thanksgiving in order to legitimize the cutting of social welfare programs, which would especially hurt minority groups.

Mere Symbolism?

In 1981, for the first time in history, a U.S. President mentioned the help of the American Indians in an official Thanksgiving proclamation. Reagan interpreted the "First Thanksgiving" as an example of intercultural harmony and support (Rea-

¹⁶ Similarly, Squanto was described as "the father" of the first Thanksgiving (Thrapp, "Squanto" B5).

gan, “Proclamation 4883”; see also Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on the Observance”). Ironically though, instead of offering help to American Indians, Reagan used the occasion to defend the cutting of social welfare programs. According to Reagan, this “voluntarism”¹⁷ of the American Indians at the “First Thanksgiving” had been part of the American character long before any social welfare programs were implemented. Consequently, there was no need for them now (Reagan, “Proclamation 4883”). Then again, two years later, in 1983, Reagan issued his “Statement on Indian Policy,” which not only bolstered the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 by rejecting the so-called “Termination Policy” (which had guided U.S. policy during the 1940s and 1960s), it also reflected his “New Federalism” by explicitly calling for more reservation self-government and self-sufficiency and less governmental intrusion (Reagan, “Statement”).¹⁸

In his 1984 proclamation Reagan (purely symbolically) acknowledged American Indian culture, recalling that “as we remember the faith and values that made America great” the Thanksgiving tradition was actually older than the nation: “Indeed, the native American Thanksgivings antedated those of the new Americans. In the words of the eloquent Seneca tradition of the Iroquois, ‘give it your thought, that with one mind we may now give thanks to Him our Creator.’” Moreover, Reagan (again, for the first time in a presidential proclamation) incorporated a reference to American Indians in the traditional ending formula: “Now, Therefore, I, Ronald Reagan, President of the United States of America, in the spirit and tradition of the Iroquois, the Pilgrims, the Continental Congress, and past Presidents, do hereby proclaim [...] a day of National Thanksgiving” (Reagan, “Proclamation 5269”).¹⁹ It remains unclear why Reagan chose to specifically mention the Iroquois (he did so again in his 1988 proclamation), who had not participated in the “First Thanksgiving.”

Despite the disservice to the Wampanoags, who had actually helped the Pilgrims, Reagan’s symbolic inclusiveness ushered in a new *Zeitgeist*, as official recognitions and designations followed suit.²⁰ In 1985, the Thanksgiving prayer during the traditional church service in Plymouth was read by a Native American in a Native language (Hillinger 26). Three years later, in 1988, ten leading clergymen of nine denominations signed an official apology to the American Indians for the church’s “long-standing participation in the destruction of traditional Native American spiritual practices” (Dullea A18). That year American Indians and various

¹⁷ Reagan used the theme of “voluntarism” in numerous speeches during his ensuing eight-year presidency (see Adams; Reagan, “Address”; Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on Voluntarism”; Reagan, “Proclamation 5827”).

¹⁸ While the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 recognized American Indian tribes as sovereign nations, the Act of 1975 allowed tribes to have more control over federally subsidized programs (Public Law 90-284; Public Law 93-638).

¹⁹ In 1986 Reagan revised this by stating that Thanksgiving was “rooted deeply in our Judeo-Christian heritage” (“Proclamation 5551”).

²⁰ Another official, solely symbolic recognition during Reagan’s presidency was the implementation of the American Indian Week around the week of Thanksgiving in 1986 (Public Law 99-471; Public Law 100-171). In 1988 and 1989 the week was moved to September and December, respectively (Public Law 100-450; Public Law 101-188). In 1990, the week was turned into the National American Indians Heritage Month in November (Public Law 101-343).

denominations organized an interreligious service at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, which the *New York Times* dubbed “a ceremony of spiritual reconciliation” (Dullea A18). In the same spirit, the *Los Angeles Times* published a drawing based on Norman Rockwell’s famous “Four Freedoms” series in 1989 (see fig. 2): In contrast to the classical white family, the drawing suggests opening up the family table to other ethnic groups. Among others we see an American Indian on the left, and the grandmother remarks that it is about time to offer more seats.



Figure 2: Flynn, Johnny P., “Pass the Turkey... and the Medicine, the Laws, the Spirituality.” *Los Angeles Times* 23 Nov. 1989: B11. Print.

Yet in reality, all seats seemed to be already taken. While the protest on Thanksgiving and the invention of a counter-holiday was an important stepping stone to legislative breakthroughs in the 1970s that reestablished an array of rights including land ownership, fishing, religion, gaming, and self-determination, many problems remained.²¹ Despite the progress American Indians made, they remained the poorest minority group during the 1980s—nearly 30 per cent lived below the poverty line by the end of the decade (Davis 177-78). The manager of the Wampanoag Homesite at Plimoth Plantation (himself a Wampanoag) expressed his feelings by alluding to Malcolm X’s famous words in 1989: “If only Plymouth Rock had landed on them [the Pilgrims]” (qtd. in Lang 38).²²

²¹ See, among others, the Indian Education Act 1972, the Indian Health Care Improvement Act 1976, the Tribally Controlled Community Colleges Act 1978, and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act 1978 (cf. Wilkinson 241-68).

²² The original reads: “We didn’t land on Plymouth Rock [...] Plymouth Rock landed on us” (Malcolm X 205).

As Charles F. Wilkinson notes in his study on tribal sovereignty, Supreme Court opinions and United States statutes “can be just paper. This is especially true in Indian matters. [...] [M]aking [...] laws real, would require a great deal of effort” (Wilkinson 268). Similarly, it seems, counter-holidays have solely a symbolic but not direct political impact. However, the National Day of Mourning today continues to be reported on and annually raises public awareness challenging the nation’s collective memory (cf. Levine; Greenstein). A study found that events that are tied to holidays receive more coverage than those that are not (Oliver and Maney, 484-85). Moreover, as sociologist Francesca Polletta explains, by staging demonstrations on holidays “challengers legitimate their own cause by linking it to hallowed values—of democracy, freedom, or patriotism. Activists want to send the message that they, and not those in power or their opponents, are staying true to the values enshrined by the holidays” (Polletta 164-65). American Indians use the National Day of Mourning to demand their inclusion into the national “imagination” through a story of white exploitation and American Indian resilience.

Conclusion

In 1836, William Apess, a famous Methodist preacher and Pequot activist, told “every man of color [to] wrap himself in mourning” for the day of the arrival of the Pilgrims.²³ It took 134 years for this counternarrative of American Indian history to be reasserted when the National Day of Mourning was born in 1970 and Thanksgiving became an arena for public discourse on American civil religion, memory, and identity.

Until the Red Power movement, the hagiography of the colonial era and civil religious tale of the Pilgrims remained nearly unquestioned. While this provided a shared sense of where American origins had supposedly come from and served as a reminder of the special blessings God had bestowed upon the nation, it also “romanticized” the visibility of American Indians who continued to “play scripted roles” as friendly bystanders to the founding of the nation (Brayboy and Seal 181, 187; see also O’Neill Grace, Bruchac, Brimberg, and Coulson).

During the 1970s the National Day of Mourning became an enduring element of the activism and tactics of the Red Power Movement. Like the actions at Alcatraz and Wounded Knee, it spotlighted American Indian grievances and its revisionary symbolism represented a new empowering unity in the fight for political autonomy. American Indians used the holiday as a platform to voice dissent and institutionalized an American Indian inversion of Thanksgiving, challenging the central “conservative” civil religious symbolism by calling for ethnic inclusiveness. They thereby not only shaped an ethnic collective memory but also wrote their trauma into the national imagination

Since then, the National Day of Mourning has been celebrated by diverse indigenous groups. In 1999 a commemorative plaque was dedicated on Cole’s Hill

²³ On Apess, see Jean O’Brien’s study of the narratives of American Indian extinction in nineteenth century New England (178-90).

underneath the Massasoit statue, describing the National Day of Mourning as “a day of remembrance and spiritual connection as well as a protest of the racism and oppression which American Indians continue to experience.”

In 2001 the Plimoth Plantation published a children’s book portraying the “First Thanksgiving” from the perspective of a six-year-old Pilgrim and a fourteen-year-old Wampanoag to show that the Plantation truly had become a “bi-cultural institution” (“Holistic” 12).²⁴ Moreover, as of 2002 the Plantation’s main building holds a permanent exhibition called “Thanksgiving: Memory, Myth and Meaning.” Seven years later, in 2009, the U.S. government formally apologized “for the past ill-conceived policies and maltreatment by the United States toward the Native peoples of this land” (Samuel Brownback (R-KS), qtd. in U.S., Congress, Senate, “Native American” 13696)—though again merely as a symbolic act, for no political concessions regarding land ownership or social programs were made. As the economic conditions of American Indians continue to lag behind, land rights and civil rights remain key contemporary political issues.

Attempts to challenge the dominant construction of a remembered past reveal the dynamism of memory and of civil religion. Holidays are expressions of a contested U.S. history that can be used as platforms of unity and of dissent. Civil religion is not just a preserver of the status quo; it can also be a crucial resource for grassroot movements, a powerful tool for challenging the status quo in the fight for inclusion. The National Day of Mourning showcases the dynamic nature and plurality of cultural memory as a subordinate group fights for more representation and commemoration of a multicultural and multivocal past. After all, as James West concluded in his aforementioned *New York Times* article from 1974: As Americans thank God on Thanksgiving they should remember that “a gracious God [...] has so much to give to white Americans, to Afro-Americans, to Vietnamese, to Mexican-Americans and to Native Americans” (West 33).

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²⁴ The National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, has published similar materials for children. Furthermore, since the late 1970s a revision of schoolbooks has also been more widely discussed (see Moore; Loewen; Collins; Libman).

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