Ain’t No Drownin’ the Spirit:

The New Orleans Civil Religion and Its Role in Hurricane Katrina

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Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>4 - 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Explanations of Hurricane Katrina</td>
<td>10 - 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Robert Bellah’s Theory of Religion</td>
<td>27 - 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. New Orleans Civil Religion</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Sacred Rituals:</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jazz Funeral</td>
<td>40 - 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mardi Gras</td>
<td>47 - 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Sacred Place: New Orleans</td>
<td>55 - 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Conclusion</td>
<td>67 - 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes</td>
<td>73 - 76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>77 - 84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in the early hours of August 29, 2005, causing the levees surrounding the city of New Orleans to rupture. As flood water rushed into the city, many people questioned the justice of God. Religious journalist, Gray Stern, attempted to discover how different religious traditions answer the questions of theodicy in his book, *Can God Intervene: How Religion Explains Natural Disasters*. His work, however, failed to capture the reaction of New Orleans’ citizens to Hurricane Katrina. Stern only interviewed the leaders of the religious traditions, not leaving room for a non-traditional interpretation of the storm. As a result, I will argue for the existence of a New Orleans civil religion. Using Robert Bellah’s theory of an American civil religion, I will demonstrate how New Orleans has its own holy people, sacred rituals and sacred places that make up a unique civil religion. Moreover, I will argue that the New Orleans civil religion helped the people of New Orleans both conceptualize the destruction of their city and rebuild in its aftermath.
I. **Introduction**

On Monday August 29, 2005 the people of New Orleans sighed a breath of relief—not only had Hurricane Katrina lessened from a category five hurricane to a category three, but its path changed in an easterly direction, sparing the city from its predicted destruction. The people claimed, once again, that they had dodged the bullet. Hours later, however, water began pouring in from Lake Ponchartrain and the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet. Eventually flood waters covered about 80% of New Orleans. “As the Mississippi [River] frothed with primal madness…it was clear that Katrina was no mere hurricane or flood. It was destined to be known as ‘the Great Deluge’ in the annals of American history.”

Hurricane Katrina quickly became the worst nightmare for a city that “lies below sea level, in a bowl bordered by levees” not only were countless homes and businesses destroyed in the flood waters, but also landmarks that defined New Orleans culture. Perhaps the most publicized of these buildings was the Superdome, which served as an emergency shelter for residents who were unable to evacuate the city. What used to be the site of Essence Music Festival and Saints’ football games, soon became a dilapidated building that could not even offer its guests shelter from the rain.

In addition to destroying the city’s civic center, Katrina attempted to destroy two of New Orleans’ most prized possessions: Mardi Gras and jazz music. Mardi Gras World—a local business and a popular tourist attraction—was nearly submerged in flood water. Owned by Blain Kern, it was home to the most “festive and world-renowned fiberglass Mardi Gras double-deck floats.” Katrina, however, tore through the doors of Mardi Gras World and left little but debris in her wake.
In the case of the Ninth Ward neighborhood—home to many of New Orleans best jazz musicians—there was not even debris left behind by Katrina’s flood waters. The Industrial Canal that separated the Ninth Ward from the Mississippi River ruptured, sending forth a flash flood that demolished everything in its path. Before Katrina, “people there respected musicians. The spirit of jazz cast a distinctly democratic, freewheeling aura over the Ninth Ward.” Most famously, the iconic New Orleans musician, Fats Domino, was a resident of the Lower Ninth Ward. His house, decorated with objects that represented his flourishing career, was reduced to merely structural framework.

However, perhaps, more shocking than the destruction of a beloved American city, was the affect that this destruction had on the citizens that had not evacuated. Countless people were forced to literally rise along with the flood waters; in order to avoid the water, they moved upwards to the second floors of their homes, then to the attics, and finally, hacked their way onto their rooftops, only to watch their belongings be swept away by the current. People were left stranded for days, without any of life’s basic necessities. Additionally, many of these people were not shown sympathy, but rather deemed idiotic for remaining in the city to face such a threatening storm.

In the aftermath of Katrina, the media portrayed the tragedy in one of two ways. The first approach was to focus on human tragedy. Camera crews captured scenes of families wading through waist deep water in an attempt to reach dry land. They shot images of dead bodies left behind by loved ones forced to think about self-preservation. They showed images of people being lifted into helicopters from their rooftops, and of residents stranded on interstate I-10 with no place to go. The images that filled newspapers, televisions and computers world-wide completely captured the helplessness and disparity brought by Hurricane Katrina.
The media, however, also concentrated a great deal on the unruly and immoral behavior that increased in the city after Hurricane Katrina’s wake. Televisions were filled with scenes of men and women walking down the streets, shopping carts full of looted goods. Stories circulated about the severity of crime in the city and the increased number of rapes that had occurred in the days after Katrina. One of the more well-known stories is of the rape of New Orleans’ musician, Charmaine Neville, whose father played saxophone for the legendary New Orleans’ band, the Neville Brothers. As she tried to escape the night’s humidity on the roof of an elementary school, Charmaine was raped at knife-point. As the media heard similar stories, they were quick to publicize them and broadcast world-wide the debased nature of those people that were left in New Orleans. 

No matter what direction news stories were aimed, all media portrayed the people of New Orleans as dehumanized. Perhaps the most disturbing images that were taken after Katrina were those of floating corpses. Some were just moving along with the current; the luckier ones were tied to a tree or post to keep them from floating away. The readiness with which photographers captured these images suggests that they had a general lack of concern for the dignity of that person, and for the sanctity of death. This was made more apparent in the attempted clean-up of New Orleans when houses were searched for remaining bodies. Afterwards the homes would be marked with an “X”, the spaces between the letter’s two intersecting lines filled with numbers. The bottom number signified how many bodies were found in the house. A few times, however, there was a house that read, “one dead cat inside” or, worse, “1 dead in the attic”. In this case, the clean-up crews literally treated humans just as animals. Worse than watching any train wreck, people world-wide could not take their eyes off such images. As a result, the media seldom focused on the lives of the people who inhabited New Orleans before Katrina.
With little decency, the media put the suffering of New Orleanians on display. However, in the five years since the storm, other approaches have been taken to capture the human aspect of Hurricane Katrina. In his book *Can God Intervene? How Religion Explains Natural Disasters*, Gary Stern addresses the religious aspect of natural disasters, the human aspect of Hurricane Katrina. Instead of focusing on the racial or political matters that surrounded Katrina—as the media did—Stern attempts to analyze how individual religious traditions explain God’s role in it. The book grew out of Stern’s study of the religious reactions to the 2004 Tsunami that hit Southern Asia. Yet, when he was gathering information, two other natural disasters occurred: an earthquake in Pakistan and Hurricane Katrina. In the aftermath of all three disasters, Stern was struck by how nearly every religious tradition raised the question: “Where was God?”

In an attempt to differentiate the responses between religious traditions, Stern divides his book to separately address the perspectives of nine major religious traditions—Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Mainline Protestantism, Evangelical Protestantism, African American Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. For each, Stern interviewed five leaders in the tradition. While he tries to cover a range of opinions within each tradition, he does not claim to have included every viewpoint. Moreover, he admits that “the people who are interviewed and briefly profiled are not meant to represent their religious tradition in any kind of complete and thorough way.”

Still, Stern’s method of classification is very useful in painting a general picture of each tradition’s beliefs about God’s role in natural disasters.

The problem, however, arises in Stern’s inclusion of a chapter on the “Nonbeliever’s Perspective”. By adding this chapter, Stern is severely limiting the scope of religion, implying that it cannot exist outside of traditional religion. Stern is not a theologian, but a journalist who
specializes in religion. As a result, he does not take the time to define “religion”. Without a specific definition, we are left to assume that the approach he takes in his book is indicative of the way he conceptualizes religion—as an institutionalized form of divine worship. Stern does not consider what exists in the realm between traditional religion and atheism.

Stern’s approach offers a strong foundation for discussing God’s role in natural disasters; however, it falls short by portraying only the opinions of leading figures in various religious traditions. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, Stern does not allow room for the voice of any New Orleans’ citizen to be heard. This is an extremely important viewpoint, because, without realizing the importance of New Orleans and its culture, it is impossible to truly understand why New Orleanians acted as they did during Katrina. Without understanding the sacred bond that New Orleanians share with their city as a place, the decision of some to remain for a Category 5 hurricane seems idiotic. Without understanding how the destruction of New Orleans threatened the existence of sacred rituals, the desperation—expressed in many forms after the hurricane—seems nothing less than barbaric. Without understanding the people’s unique beliefs about life and death, their quick relapse into celebration seems irreverent. In the midst of a disaster as large as Hurricane Katrina, it is imperative that outsiders attempt to understand the culture of those affected, in order to both better conceptualize the people’s reactions, as well as effectively help in the rebuilding process.

In this paper, I will first follow Gary Stern’s method to highlight how people of various religious traditions employed religious language and theology uniquely to discuss the role of God in Hurricane Katrina. However, I will then go beyond Stern’s classification system to argue that the people of New Orleans who are either not affiliated with a particular religious tradition or did not use their traditional religion to explain Katrina use their distinct New Orleans culture
as a civil religion. In order to suggest this interpretation of the New Orleans culture, I will apply
Robert Bellah’s theory of an American civil religion to the city of New Orleans. Using his
definition of religion, as well as pointing out dimensions in New Orleans culture and society that
Bellah deems vital to religion in general—holy persons, sacred rituals and sacred places—I will
argue that a New Orleans civil religion not only exists, but continues to play an integral role in
helping the city cope with the destruction brought about by Hurricane Katrina.
II. **Explanations of Hurricane Katrina**

In researching how the people conceptualized Hurricane Katrina and its destruction, I noticed a strong divide between the reactions of those affiliated with a religious tradition and those whose beliefs do not align with a particular tradition. However, the literature that I found on those who belong to a religious tradition coincides with that presented by Stern in his book, *Can God Intervene?*. While Stern discusses the viewpoints of nine different religious traditions, I will only use the four that I find most applicable in my discussion of Hurricane Katrina—Catholicism, Mainstream Protestantism, Evangelical Protestantism, and African American Christianity.

In this section, I will discuss how religious traditions vary in their approaches to answering the question of theodicy and accounting for God’s role during Hurricane Katrina. I will address each tradition separately, summarizing Stern’s findings and supplementing them with my own research, as well as providing a general overview of the tradition’s beliefs about the occurrence of natural disasters and Hurricane Katrina. Additionally, I will offer a “New Orleanian Perspective” that will highlight how many New Orleanians—despite the fact that are affiliated with traditional religions—did not use God or traditional religion to conceptualize Hurricane Katrina.

Before beginning this discussion, however, I will briefly explain the concept of theodicy and its relation to the study of natural disasters. The word theodicy can be separated into two parts, each with origin in Ancient Greek. The first is θεός (“theos”), meaning “god”, or divine”; the second is δίκη (“dike”), translated as justice. Combining the two parts, the word theodicy literally translates as “the justice of god”. The study of theodicy explores the existence of evil in the world, attempting to discover how a just God allows human suffering. Oftentimes, different
religious traditions hold different theodicies, using their unique beliefs to explain God’s relation with evil. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the study of theodicy was undertaken as people asked questions of God’s justice. For example, Michael Dyson, author of *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and The Color of Disaster*, asks the questions: “Why would God allow this to happen to me?”, “Why did God allow Katrina to lash out?” In the following chapter I will address the general theodicies of the Catholic, Mainstream Protestant, Evangelical Protestant and African American Christian traditions, explaining how the theodicy of each helped shape their understanding of God during Hurricane Katrina.

A. **“The Catholic Perspective”**

In his section on the Catholic perspective, Gary Stern indicates that there is a common misconception about the unbending nature of the Catholic Church. Pointing to the strict guidelines put forth by the Vatican, he claims that “ordinary Roman Catholics” (i.e. those not ordained) believe that “their church is overly rigid in their thinking”. However, the Catholic scholars that he interviews suggest that the Catholic Church is open to the discussion of challenging subjects, such as that of theodicy. From his research, Stern concludes that Catholics are not afraid to admit that it is impossible to both know the ways of God and understand his role in natural disasters. Additionally, his data highlights the important role that suffering plays in maintaining and strengthening the Catholic faith.

One of the Catholic scholars whom Stern interviews is Reverend Benedict Groeschel, a Catholic priest and the founder of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal religious order. Groeschel is not afraid to admit that theodicy is an extremely difficult subject to discuss, let alone provide an answer for. He explains that “nobody has the bright, sparkling answer. Anybody who thinks they have the answer to evil, just reply to them…Wait.” Interestingly,
however, Groeschel does not believe that the lack of an answer indicates a lack of faith. Instead, he talks about the mystery of evil that accompanies unknowing and how the existence of such mystery can be beneficial to Catholics. He says,

The Christian answer, put succinctly, is that God comes and accepts the worst of the human condition…In Christianity, you have the only religion where God suffers. In Judaism, God rejoices and God gets annoyed, but he doesn’t suffer. The next step is that God suffers—with us and for us. This has to get a Christian through. That doesn’t mean there is no mystery…there is mystery of evil, different kinds of evil.  

Groeschel’s discussion of theodicy implies that he sees a strong separation between God and evil. God is a loving being who suffers with us through the evil that is present in our world; however, God is not responsible for such evil. Groeschel believes that through accepting the mysterious nature of evil, Catholics may be more likely to undergo a strengthening of faith.  

Similarly, Father Michael Scanlan, a charismatic Catholic and the chancellor of Franciscan University in Ohio, acknowledges the mysterious ways of God. He explains,

“We don’t have God’s mind. We certainly know that there is a history, from Scripture, of God allowing punishment, both for correction and for the greater good. How much is punishment after a given disaster? We don’t know. People who speak out that way better be speaking out based on a sense of what God is telling them. I don’t see how we can make any definitive conclusions.”

While he recognizes that punishment from God is evident in the Bible, he suggests that we will never be able to know to what extent Hurricane Katrina was a punishment. For, God’s intentions remain a mystery.

Furthermore, although Scanlan does not directly discuss suffering, he speaks of the road to humiliation as a form of suffering. He says,

We live in a society of presumption. We presume we can control things, we are in control…That is simply false. We are basically creatures who live by the providence and mercy of God. God has to allow the truth to come home to us and break through. There are times that the only thing that can break through is something big enough to knock us off our feet. It takes humiliation…In New Orleans, what do you mean our precautions and levees weren’t enough? It creates a humbling situation. Out of humility comes an openness to new truths. Out of new truths comes an openness to salvation.
Scalan believes that through disasters such as Katrina, people realize that they have little control over their lives. While at first this may be extremely upsetting, it ultimately leads Christians to seek humility—a virtue which allows one to come closer to obtaining salvation. Thus, he demonstrates that for Catholics the path to humility first brings suffering, but, ultimately ends in happiness. In this line of thinking, Hurricane Katrina could be viewed not as divine punishment, but as a necessary step towards the ultimate reward of salvation.

In my research, I came across statements made by Thomas Roscia, a Catholic Priest who was interviewed by author Michael Dyson for his book *Come Hell or High Water*. In his interview, Roscia discussed the role of God during Hurricane Katrina, highlighting the themes of mystery and suffering that Stern found central to the Catholic faith. Roscia believes that God’s inaction in the midst of tragedy points to His deep concern for human beings. He explains,

> God doesn’t intervene to prevent such things, because God loves us too much. If we had a God who simply swooped down to halt natural catastrophes, prevent human tragedy and sinfulness, then religion and faith would simply be reduced to some form of magic and fate, and we would be helpless pawns on some divine chess board.\(^{16}\)

At first this statement may seem to paint God as a careless being who not only neglects His offspring, but sits idly and watches as they suffer. However, the central belief behind Roscia’s statement is that God does not prevent suffering because through suffering humans are able to demonstrate their gift of free will. God does not “derail the machinery of time and circumstance to help us, since that very machinery has at other moments brought us such pleasure and profit.” Although it may seem nonsensical, if God were to take away human suffering and play a more active role in human lives, we would no longer have the luxury of free will—a luxury that in the Christian tradition separates human beings from other creatures.\(^{17}\)
The research that both Stern and I conducted indicates that many Catholics understand the importance of discussing theodicy and the role that God played in Hurricane Katrina, because they believe that raising such questions will lead to a stronger faith. However, it is important to acknowledge that none of the people discussed are expecting such discussions to lead to a definitive answer. Stern summarizes the Catholic view by saying, “Catholics approach suffering by looking to Christ on the cross while embracing the mysteries of life.” The Catholic journey through suffering, as was apparent in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, may be full of unanswered questions, but it is through this very mystery that the Catholic faith grows.

B. “The Mainline Protestant Perspective”

Through his research, Gary Stern came to the conclusion that Mainline Protestants differ from Catholics not in how they conceptualize God’s role in natural disasters—for both believe that it is impossible to provide a definite answer—but rather in their physical response to the disaster. The Mainline Protestants that were interviewed by Stern, as well as the accounts that I found in my research, suggest that in this Christian tradition acting to help those suffering is more important than fully understanding the existence of evil in the world.

A person who exemplifies this belief is Reverend Shanta Premawardhana, the chief interfaith official for the NCC (National Council of Churches) who was interviewed by Stern. Not only does Premawardhana internalize his suffering and use it as a driving force for giving back to others, but he also explains his beliefs more fully by using the image of Jesus suffering on the cross. Believing that God cries with humans through suffering, he explains,

God says, ‘I am involved in the pain of this’. To me, that is what Jesus on the cross is about. God is involved in human suffering and pain and is urging us to engage with that pain so that we might bring healing, we might be agents of healing.
Instead of viewing pain solely as a vehicle for strengthening one’s faith, he looks to Jesus’ suffering on the cross as an example of how one person’s pain can become a blessing for others. Thus, the best response to Hurricane Katrina is not to blame others for your suffering, nor attempt to figure out why such a tragedy occurred, but to turn this pain into constructive emotions that can help heal others.

Similar to the views expressed by Premawadhana, Reverend Charles Henderson, the executive director of the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life, believes that God suffers with humans. The interview conducted by Stern, however, suggest that he views the relationship between God and humans to be much closer than that suggested by Premawardhana. For example, in explaining human suffering he points to man’s likeness to God, saying:

> Senseless suffering is a part of human life. I think that God, being all encompassing, omnipresent, is suffering right there with us…God is right here. We are created in the image of God. So when a human is put in a situation that violates the dignity of a person…that is the image of God being violated. It is blasphemy.²¹

Due to the fact that humans are created in the likeness of God, human suffering also entails the suffering of God. Although Henderson does not directly state the need to help others during tragedy, his belief about the strong association between the God and humans indicates his deep concern for others. During a catastrophe such as Hurricane Katrina, it is likely that Henderson’s response would be one of action to end suffering and preserve the dignity of humans as well as that of God.

While conducting my own research, I found example of Mainline Protestants who reacted to Hurricane Katrina in a manner similar to that described in Stern’s book. Rather than dwelling on the questions of theodicy, my data shows that many Mainline Protestants work to help others. Reverend Bill Cwirla, pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Hacienda Heights, California, serves as an example of this type of reaction.²²
On September 1, 2005 Cwirla was interviewed by Todd Wilken of KFUO radio in St. Louis Missouri in a segment entitled, “The Theology of the Cross & Hurricane Katrina”. The main question that Wilken posed to Cwirla was, “Where was God in all of this?”, pointing out many people’s belief that Hurricane Katrina was a form of divine punishment. Quickly, however, Cwirla dismisses this claim, arguing that if God punished all sinners as severely as during Katrina there would be no humans left on earth, because everyone is guilty of sin.  

Moreover, Cwirla uses the Book of Job to support his belief that while Hurricane Katrina was not meant as a punishment, God’s true intentions cannot be known. In particular, he points to the scene during which Job’s friends attempt to ease his suffering by “theologizing for God”. Their theories to explain his hardships, however, only bring Job more suffering. For Cwirla, the true message from the book of Job is that we cannot expect to find an answer, but, instead, must accept the path that God has placed in front of us—no matter how arduous.  

In order to strengthen this message, Cwirla turns to the image of the crucified Christ. He explains that the only way “to convince yourself that God is good when he seems to treat you like an enemy” is to look to “the face of Jesus Christ, particularly his dead face on the cross where he becomes the sufferer.” Like Premawardhana, Cwirla turns to the suffering of Christ on the cross in order to find hope in the midst of tragedy. Just as Jesus takes up all the world’s suffering into his being and makes it good in his death, so too must we endure suffering, such as Hurricane Katrina, to understand the goodness of God. 

Additionally, Cwirla speaks of the frustration he feels, watching on television as the events of Katrina unfold in New Orleans. He explains that “Katrina has filled [his congregation] with a sense of helplessness”, because they are unable to make direct contact with those in need.
Similar to the other Mainstream Protestant perspectives, Cwirla’s faith cannot be fulfilled simply through theological study and spiritual contemplation, but requires action to reach its potential.  

This idea of actively fulfilling the will of God is also embodied by the organization Adventures In Mission (AIM). AIM is a Protestant missionary organization that responded to the call for help in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. Those who volunteered had a clear understanding of their role in the catastrophe; they believed that they were responding to God’s call to act as a Christ figure and bring relief to those in need. They explain,

> These kinds of compelling opportunities only come along for the Church once in a generation. This is our moment. It will take at least three years to put many of New Orleans’ families back on their feet. We can’t switch channels…To do so would be to surrender the one great chance that we, as the body of Christ, may have in our lives to reaffirm our corporate identity as healers and difference-makers. It would be a shame to turn our back on destiny.

The language used in this passage highlights the deep religious significance that AIM finds in helping others. To begin, the organization believes that Hurricane Katrina has provided them the opportunity to fulfill their destiny, to demonstrate the spiritual healing powers of their church. Moreover, in order to fulfill their destiny they will not simply follow in Christ’s example, but will act “as the body of Christ”. Just as Christ’s body was resurrected for the salvation of humanity, so too will AIM act selflessly to “resurrect and sustain” hope in the people of New Orleans. Their passion for providing physical and spiritual comfort for the people of New Orleans demonstrates the importance of using the Protestant faith to make a difference in the world.

Like Catholics, many mainstream Protestants are hesitant to give a definite answer to the question of theodicy. They struggle with whether or not God played a direct role in Hurricane Katrina. Ultimately, however, their faith does not depend on finding such answers, but rather on their physical response to catastrophes such as Katrina. Stern explains that “It’s given that
Mainline Protestants react to tragedy by rolling up their sleeves and getting to work.” 29 Their guidance is provided not only by prayer, but also through the example of Jesus’ life and the Theology of the Cross.

C. “The Evangelical Christian Perspective”

Stern’s study of the Evangelical Christian Perspective led him to conclude that this division of Christianity differs from others in its strong reliance on the Bible as a guide for living. The people that he interviewed stress the importance of using the Bible to cope with disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. An example of this can be found in David LeFlore’s interview with Stern. LeFlore works for the American Tract Society, an organization that is known for handing out tracts that preach the Protestant Christian faith. After Hurricane Katrina, such tracts explained that while natural disasters are tragic, hope can be found in Christ’s salvation. He briefly explains that the purpose of the tracts is to show that “God is still in the picture”. Pointing to examples in the Bible where God permits injustice, he explains this happens so that God “would be made more prominent”. 30

Moreover, while he preaches a message of hope and claims that natural disasters are not a form of divine punishment, LeFlore blames original sin for all of life’s tragedies. Turning to Genesis for proof, he says:

“Let’s face it, if Adam and Eve hadn’t eaten that fruit in the Garden of Eden, we wouldn’t have sin. We were created in a perfect likeness of God. Because men had the choice to sin, sin is what caused death and what causes these natural and man-made disasters.” 31

Thus humans, in their sinful nature, have brought suffering upon themselves. For LeFlore, there is no way to avoid the suffering brought about by catastrophes or avoid the final punishment of death. Yet, for Christians there is the hope of salvation through the acceptance of the gospel. 32
Another Evangelical Christian interviewed by Stern who teaches the biblical message of fire and brimstone is Vinson Synan, a professor at Regent University in Virginia. Synan explains the world’s degradation as a result of God’s wrath for human sin. If it were not for original sin, the world would exist in an orderly and beautiful form. Yet, because Eve ate the apple in the garden, humans are fated to live in a world where God allows humans to suffer. Synan suggests that while God may not create suffering intentionally for humans, He does nothing to end it. However, just because everyone is born with original sin, Synan does not believe that all humans are deserving of type of severe suffering brought by Hurricane Katrina. As part of the world created by original sin, the innocent must suffer with the wicked. Thus, retribution in the form of natural disasters is a punishment for the human condition, not specific sins.

In addition to the Evangelical Christians interviewed by Stern, there are also others, such as TV evangelist Pat Robertson, who made public declarations about God’s role in Hurricane Katrina. A graduate from Washington and Lee University, Pat Robertson has gained infamy for his outspoken remarks about Christian theodicy. Only two days after Hurricane Katrina, Pat Robertson appeared on his show, The 700 Club, claiming that the hurricane was divine retribution for legalized abortion in New Orleans. Relying on the Bible, and the book of Leviticus in particular, to support his claim, Robertson says that those who “shed innocent blood” will be vomited out by the land. As a result, they will not be able to defend themselves from destruction, as was the case during Hurricane Katrina.

Similarly, Reverend John Hagee, an extremely conservative TV evangelist, publically claimed that Hurricane Katrina was a direct punishment for the New Orleans people. Appearing on National Public Radio a year after the storm hit, he said, “All hurricanes are acts of God because God controls the heavens. I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was
offensive to God and they were recipients of the judgment of God for that.” Taking a more aggressive approach than those evangelicals interviewed by Stern, Hagee’s mission is to “take the Gospel to all the world and all generations”, even if it means offending some non-believers along the way.37

The information that both Stern and I gathered suggests that Evangelical Protestants are distinguished from other Christian traditions in their dependence on Biblical scripture. As Stern points out, “Evangelicals will look to the Bible for their ultimate understanding of all natural events”. Turning primarily to the portrait of an omnipotent and vengeful God, many claim that God played a role in Hurricane Katrina. However, the punishment issued through Hurricane Katrina was not unwarranted, but rather punishment for the original sin of humans. My supporting evidence makes clear that some evangelicals will even go so far as to say that Katrina was punishment for a specific sin.

D. “The African American Christian Perspective”

The African American Christian Perspective is particularly important to consider in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, since seventy-five percent of the residents living in the area that were damaged by Katrina were black.38 As Stern points out, the African American perspective is unique in its approach to theodicy. Unlike many of the other traditions, the African American church has suffered through oppression and racism, and has come to rely on its “faith to get through hard times”.39 As a result, theodicy has not been a predominant theme in the church, because their hardships have not allowed them the luxury of questioning God’s will. Instead, many people in the African American tradition tend to accept suffering as an everyday part of life and to look to God in times of need.40
However, Professor Anthony B. Pinn’s analysis of God’s role in Hurricane Katrina offers an exception. Interviewed by Stern, Pinn is a professor of religion at Rice University in Houston. He has written many books on the subject of black theodicy—trying to address how and why the African American population suffers. He explains that African Americans realize that both the just and unjust suffer, but question God when issues of race arise. Thus, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina many of the African Americans in New Orleans were not concerned with why the storm happened, but why they were the ones who suffered most severely. Realizing, however, that answers to the questions of black theodicy may never be provided, Pinn explains that black Christians tend to find redemptive power in suffering, using the suffering Christ on the cross as an example.

Similarly, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, a female member of the historically black Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, believes that theodicy is a luxury that only those with social equality can afford to ponder. Turning to slavery in America, she discusses the importance of hope of salvation, which cannot be retained if one is questioning the omnipotence or morality of God. As Stern assesses, “There’s not much room in this traditions…for blaming God.” Still, despite the fact that she recognizes the racial injustices in our world, she does not question God’s presence in the world. She says, “I don’t believe that God forsakes us. But sometimes people try to come up with answers when we’re better off saying I don’t know.” Kirk-Duggan does not find her faith in trouble, because she does not try to reconcile the evil in the world with God. Her African American Christian faith has taught her to fight for justice, but never to question the goodness of God.
In my research, I found similar African American Christian reactions to Hurricane Katrina. For example, Michael Dyson, in his book *Come Hell or High Water*, addresses the unique role theodicy plays in the African American Christian tradition. He explains:

Black religious faith, especially Christianity, discourages such a narrow interpretation of nature and God. The suffering that human beings endure is never God’s will. The evil that is wrought by human beings…and the chaos that is unleashed by nature express neither God’s vision nor vengeance, as punitive theodicies suggest. God’s will is for human beings to flourish and for us to live in harmony with each other and nature.45

Dyson’s overview of black theodicy suggests that African Americans believe that the world’s troubles cannot simply be blamed on God, but are the result of more complex and unexplainable forces. As a result, they are able to fully believe in the goodness of God, trusting that His intentions are always in the best interest of humans. Therefore, many African American Christians did not attempt to reconcile the justice of God with the destruction of Hurricane Katrina.

Furthermore, just as Pinn points to the power of suffering, Dyson claims that “our suffering, when viewed through mature faith, can provide a window into existence and a measure of relief.” This is particularly interesting, because unlike in the Catholic and mainstream Protestant traditions where suffering has the ability to strengthen faith, in the African American Christian tradition, a mature faith is the tool that allows one to fully understand and appropriately react to suffering. Black faith teaches people not only to accept suffering as an unavoidable part of life, but also to trust fully in God despite daily evidence of affliction. As a result, Dyson explains that suffering serves as a reminder to “live even more fully and purposefully” to counteract the unpredictable nature of evil.46

Another source that provides information about the African American perspective on Hurricane Katrina is a documentary, entitled “Trouble the Water”, about Kimberly River Roberts’ experience before, during and after the storm. Interestingly, despite the terror that
unfolds during the documentary—her house flooding while she’s inside, finding her loved ones deceased—only twice does Roberts makes comments suggesting God had a hand in Katrina. As she is watching the rain come down, she says, “The Lord is upset with New Orleans and I don’t blame Him.” Then, after the flood waters take over her neighborhood, she assesses the situation, saying, “We are on a lake. This is the Lord’s work.” Still, Roberts does not speak with contempt for God, but makes these comments in a matter-of-fact tone. She believes that God was involved in Hurricane Katrina in some way, but is not angry with Him. 47

Additionally, throughout the rest of the documentary, Roberts calls on God only in prayer and thanksgiving. While Hurricane Katrina is hitting New Orleans, she makes comments such as “Lord, please protect me and my family”, and “Be with us, Lord, please.” Even in her greatest time of need, she does not question the ways of God, but instead looks to God for protection. Moreover, after she is forced to leave her home because of the storm, she talks about the wondrous ways of the Lord, saying, “It’s not my battle; it’s the Lord’s”, and, “If you trust in God, He’ll send miracles your way”. Roberts’ African American Christian faith has taught her to put full trust in God. As a result, she was able to persevere through the trials of Hurricane Katrina without questioning the existence of suffering and God’s role in it. 48

As suggested from the accounts discussed, the African American Christian tradition is unique in that it is not concerned with discovering the role that God played during Hurricane Katrina. It preaches the message that suffering is a part of everyday life and that dwelling on its existence only detracts from the joy of life and one’s faith in God.
E. The New Orleanian Perspective

Stern’s book provides an extremely interesting and useful generalization about how different religious traditions explain disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. However, the problem with Stern and the non-New Orleanians that he interviews is that both miss the religious value of being a New Orleans citizen. While they can offer an analysis of the situation from a safe distance, neither can provide a genuine reaction because they are so far removed from the New Orleans and its culture. In order obtain a true reaction to the devastation, it is imperative that one look to the people most affected, the people of New Orleans.

Despite the fact that my research did not lead me to any New Orleanian theodicy, I will offer a speculation about how one would look. To begin, it would be a theodicy in the sense that it would attempt to answer the questions concerning the existence of evil and injustice; however it would differ from the traditional sense of the word in that it would not include a divine being in its explanation. As will be discussed later, the New Orleans people hold a unique belief about the relation of joy and sorrow, life and death. I believe that this belief would be the leading force of the New Orleanian theodicy, reassuring the people that with sorrow there is always joy and with death always life. Thus, in the wake of a disaster, the New Orleans people would take comfort, knowing that there is hope for the future.

However, I was able to find accounts of New Orleanians whose conceptualization of Hurricane Katrina outwardly rejected the theodicies of traditional religions. An example of this can be found in Douglas Brinkley’s book, *The Great Deluge*. In it, he discusses the biblical role that floods have played:

Children learn the story of Noah’s ark from Genesis: a kindly Old Testament bearded man with a curved cane brought two of every animal species on his wooden vessel and floated away in Dr.Dolittle fashion… But there was nothing storybook or mythological about the flooded streets … These were rivers of death, the pale rider or the grinning skull of the Styx ferryman, translated into a
Brinkley continues his description of death’s fierceness, providing gruesome details about the corpses that were left floating in the flood water. With these descriptions contrasting the storybook image of Noah’s ark, Brinkley is defending his claim that Hurricane Katrina was not a myth or a biblical anecdote; it was a real event with devastating consequences.

Chris Rose is New Orleans resident who expresses a view similar to Brinkley. In his book, *I Dead in the Attic: After Katrina*, Rose outwardly rejects the Evangelical Christian perspective previously discussed. Rather emphatically, he explains that

> Someone has to call out the demagogic ministers who have used Katrina’s destruction to preach the message that God was tired of the city’s libertine ways and decided to clean house…No doubt it’s a good message for the evangelical business. Of course, try telling some poor sap…who goes to Bible Study every Wednesday night that he lost his house and his job and his grandmother died in a flooded nursing home because God was angry at a bunch of bearded guys in dresses.

Rose’s sarcastic tone indicates that he is not only greatly upset about such Evangelical claims, but that he is also completely unconvinced that Hurricane Katrina was a form of divine retribution.

Although Rose never offers a clear explanation for the devastation of New Orleans, another essay in his book suggests that Rose uses a non-traditional form of religion to help him conceptualize the city’s destruction. In his essay entitled “He’s Picking the Pairs for Nola’s Ark”, Rose claims that in the threat of another disaster he is “going to load up an ark and sail to an alien, distant shore with a pair of everything that makes New Orleans what it is—so unique, so charming, and eccentric—and we’re going to start all over again, two by two.” He continues on to name the ark’s inhabitants, including on his list famous New Orleans’ chefs, musicians, football players and festival organizers.
Rose’s reaction to the disaster is extremely interesting, because he utilizes biblical imagery, but replaces biblical characters with people of cultural significance in New Orleans. Rose’s essay highlights the exact perspective that Stern omits in his book—the religious value of being a New Orleans citizen. In the remainder of the paper, I will discuss this religious value in detail and argue that it has helped other New Orleanians both conceptualize and cope with Hurricane Katrina. First, however, I will provide a religious theory that will support my interpretation that the New Orleans culture is used as civil religion.
III. **Robert Bellah’s Theory of Religion**

During the early part of the 20th Century, sociologist Emile Durkheim introduced a new method for explaining human thought and action, which claimed that individuals cannot be studied separately from the society which they are a part; he believed that individuals must be studied “in and through society”. In addition to this new sociological method, he also proposed a new theory of religion elucidating the function of religion in society. Just as he believed that individuals must be studied in the context of society, Durkheim viewed religion as something inseparable from society. Thus, he defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden”, which “unite into one moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them”. In fact, Durkheim believed that any cohesive community united by common beliefs and practices had a religious dimension.

Furthermore, Durkheim claims that it is through the sacred that individuals afford themselves the opportunity to look past the self and recognize their position in the society.

Robert Bellah’s theory of religion is heavily influenced by Durkheim’s sociological approach to the study of religion. In brief, he defines religion as “a set of symbolic forms and acts that relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence”. However, his theory of religion is much more complex than this definition allows. Adhering to the sociological theory of action, Bellah believes that the sociological system is an action system composed of four subsystems—culture, society, personality and behavioral organism. The first two subsystems act as guiding mechanisms, while the last two provide “the energy to run the system”. The structure of an action system is of utmost importance because each subsystem plays a different role in receiving information, in the form of symbols, that ultimately shape the system.
Religion functions as the “most general mechanism for integrating meaning and motivation into the action system”. Bellah stresses the importance of understanding that religion functions within all four subsystems, and therefore, within the entirety of human action. He explains this further, saying,

“Beliefs and symbols are important, but so are the social forms in which religion is practiced and transmitted as well as the relation of those forms to the rest of society; the personal orientations that it evokes and the habits it inculcates; and the bodily forms in which it is expressed.”

Referring back to a time before “religion” was a word describing a personal set of beliefs, Bellah defines religion as a set of symbols that penetrates all dimensions of the human world, providing humans with ultimate meaning in life.

Because Bellah believes religion functions within culture and society, he has become a strong proponent for the existence of civil religion. He first explained the concept of civil religion in his 1967 essay entitled “Civil Religion in America”, which was published for the journal Daedalus. While many people believed that he was arguing for the existence of a nationalistic religion, Bellah makes clear in his 1968 reprint that he was not “supporting an idolatrous worship of the American nation.” Rather, he acknowledges that there are “certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share.” Bellah believes that these common religious elements have become a part of the American institution and serve as guiding “ethical principals” in the political sphere. These ethical principals provide standards by which the nation can not only critique the morality of its actions, but also through which it can transcend its temporal state.

“This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that [Bellah] is calling the American civil religion.” By examining speeches of some of America’s most influential presidents, as well as studying the function of national holidays and celebrations,
Bellah argues that the institutionalized form of civil religion shares the same characteristics of traditional religions. In this essay, Bellah defines these religious characteristics as holy persons, sacred rituals, sacred places, and sacred symbols.\textsuperscript{64}

\section*{A. Holy Persons}

The first dimension of Bellah’s American civil religion, and the most thoroughly discussed, is holy persons. It is divided into three categories: founders, prophets and martyrs. When discussing the founders of American civil religion, Bellah is pointing to the first three presidents of the United States, also known as the founding fathers. He argues that “the words and acts of the founding fathers especially shaped the form and tone of the civil religion as it has been maintained ever since”. \textsuperscript{65} In order to stress the highly religious nature in which America was founded, Bellah offers an analysis of Washington’s inaugural address. One of the passages that he looks at reads,

\begin{quote}
No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of man more than those of the United States. Every step by which we have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency….” \textsuperscript{66}
\end{quote}

In this passage, Bellah is not solely interested in Washington’s acknowledgement of higher power—an Invisible hand—but is also struck by the language he uses to describe the higher power. Instead of using definite names such as, “God” or “Lord”, Washington uses vague metaphors for god. Interestingly, both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson employ the same type of speech during their presidencies. Adams refers to God in terms such as, “Patron of Order” and the “Fountain of Justice”, while Jefferson uses lengthy phrases such as, “that Almighty Being whose power regulates the destiny of our nations”. \textsuperscript{67}
The question remains: why should the founding fathers go to such great lengths to avoid the direct name of God when the people they are addressing know that they are affiliated with the Christian church? For Bellah, the answer to this question serves as a main argument for the existence of an American civil religion. In order to acknowledge the separation of church and state, our first presidents did not speak directly about a particular religious tradition. However, in their speech they expressed religious notions that were dethatched from traditional religion, but which intimately related to the “self-conception of the new republic”. While their personal religious beliefs affected their use of language, they employed religious language only to discuss the state, not their personal beliefs. Thus, unknowingly, they shaped the tone of the American civil religion.

Additionally, all of the subsequent American presidents have followed in the footsteps of the founding fathers. In “Civil Religion in America”, Bellah focuses on one president in particular, Abraham Lincoln, whom he believes not only served as a prophet for the American civil religion, but also as a martyr. Lincoln was president during one of America’s most trying periods—the Civil War. His speeches were oftentimes heavy in religious language, referencing God directly and quoting the Bible. Additionally, during his presidency “a new theme of death, sacrifice, and rebirth enters the civil religion. It is symbolized in the life and death of Lincoln”. 69

B. Sacred Ritual

The second quality of American society that helps to qualify it as a civil religion is its inclusion of sacred rituals in its annual calendar. In his essay, Bellah speaks about Memorial Day, which serves as a civil ritual and an annual reminder of some of the key values of American civil religion. The holiday was first established after the Civil War to commemorate those who died in battle. In doing so, the holiday readdresses the theme of sacrifice that was adopted by
American civil religion with the assassination of President Lincoln. In the words of Bellah, “the Memorial Day observance, especially in the towns and smaller cities of America, is a major event for the whole community involving a rededication to the martyred dead, to the spirit of sacrifice, and to the American vision”. Borrowing from Durkheim’s theory that the sacred serves as a mechanism for bringing the cult or community together, Bellah argues that Memorial Day has become a sacred ritual day not only because of its symbolic meaning, but also because of its unifying quality. Memorial Day gives Americans the opportunity to look past themselves, recognize the sacrifices others have made for the community and situate themselves within the sacred community. Thus, it serves as a ritualistic expression of a key concept in American civil religion—sacrifice.

C. Sacred Place

Although Bellah does not thoroughly discuss the idea of sacred place in his essay, he does discuss the supreme importance of Arlington National Cemetery. The land that eventually became the final home for America’s martyrs was once owned by the Lee family. In a rather obvious symbolic gesture, the land was taken from the Confederate family and dedicated as America’s national cemetery. In addition to providing a resting place for those who died in battle, Arlington Cemetery is also home to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. This tomb is guarded at all times and is dedicated to the unidentified soldiers who have sacrificed their lives in war. Additionally, the tomb of John F. Kennedy, “another martyred president” is in the cemetery. As a result, Arlington National Cemetery is a sacred place for American civil religion. It is rich in symbolism that has “found physical and ritual expression”, attracting more than four million people annually to honor America’s martyrs.
Additionally, the language that Bellah uses in his essay suggests that America, itself, is a sacred place. The geographic region of America and the civil religion that exists within this region are inseparable. The geographic and cultural diversity of America might not have been able to live harmoniously without the unifying civil religion of America and the civil religion would not have flourished without the founding of America. Thus, because of how central a role the land of America plays in its civil religion, it can easily be considered a sacred place.

D. Sacred Symbols

In his essay, Bellah speaks of civil religion as something “genuinely American and genuinely new. It has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols”. 75 Despite the fact that in his definition Bellah gives symbolism its own category, the rest of his essay makes clear that he does not believe symbols exist in a category of their own. On the contrary, Bellah asserts that symbols are central to understanding the reverence towards holy people, sacred rituals and sacred places.
IV. **New Orleans Civil Religion**

Using Bellah’s definition of religion as well as his argument for the existence of an American civil religion, I will argue that civil religion does not simply exist on a national level. As is evident in New Orleans, a civil religion can be active within the confines of a city. In the following section, I will copy Bellah’s approach by demonstrating that in New Orleans there exists a civil religion with its own holy people (Huey Long), sacred rituals (Jazz Funerals and Mardi Gras) and sacred places (the city of New Orleans). However, unlike Bellah, I will not solely use my observations and interpretations to prove my argument. On the contrary, I will allow for the people of New Orleans to speak for themselves by providing first-hand descriptions and analyses of the religious culture of the city. Additionally, I will discuss how the New Orleans civil religion was not only influenced by Hurricane Katrina, but also how it was an influence on how New Orleanians dealt with the disaster.

A. **Holy People: Huey Long**

In “Civil Religion in America”, Bellah discusses the pantheon of sacred people in American civil religion, including within this group Abraham Lincoln. Bellah argues that Lincoln served as a Christ figure throughout the crisis of the Civil War. Lincoln’s speeches reflect that as a leader he was forced to make difficult decisions that he felt would effectively address the current problems of society. Using a nondenominational God as a guiding figure, he sought to save the Union and unify the United States through the abolition of slavery. Although his beliefs ultimately brought about his death, the role he played as a savior to the United States made him a holy person in American civil religion. 76
Louisiana, and the city of New Orleans in particular, had a similar Christ figure that appeared on the political scene in the early 1900’s. Huey P. Long, also known as The Kingfish for his trickster-like qualities, was from a modest family in northern Louisiana. After a rather embarrassing academic stint at Tulane University in New Orleans, Long opened his own law practice. As his reputation as a lawyer grew, so too did Long’s desire to be in the public eye. In 1918 he won his first public election and became District Attorney in Louisiana. Ten years later Long became the 40th Governor of Louisiana and continued his political career, becoming a US Senator in 1935 and running for the 1936 presidential nomination.

Although Huey Long received strong opposition from those who thought that his ideas were too radical, Marcia Gaudet, in her essay, “The Kingfish as a Trickster Hero”, shows that “for many in Louisiana, Long was indeed a savior”. She points out that his charisma and good works caused many people to revere him as triumphant hero. Similar to the role of Lincoln as described by Bellah, Long offered a critique of Louisiana society and presented solutions for the major social problems of the time. Moreover, these solutions were presented publically in speeches that employed transcendent religious language. In the following section, I will argue that Huey Long acted as a savior to the people of Louisiana in a time of crisis, and thus has become a holy person in the New Orleans civil religion.

What was the crisis that plagued Louisiana and the city of New Orleans during the lifetime of Huey Long? Coincidentally, Huey Long was up against many of the same problems that contemporary New Orleanians face. In the early 1920’s when Long’s political career was just taking off, the nation was recovering from the First World War. The end of the war brought about a decline in demand for agriculture goods, leaving farmers in Southern Louisiana in a severe financial crisis. This economic crisis was exacerbated by the 1927 flood of the
Mississippi River that caused damage in seven states. Although this flood was not the result of a hurricane as in recent times, the damage that it caused was equally extensive. It flooded over six million acres of land and affected nearly 300,000 people. 

In order to spare the metropolitan area of New Orleans, engineers decided to rupture the levees south of the city, causing the flood waters to pour into the lower class neighborhoods of St. Bernard and Plaquemines Parish. In a song that has become the anthem for post- Katrina New Orleans, Randy Newman describes the flooding of 1927. He sings,

The river rose all day  
The river rose all night  
Some people got lost in the flood  
Some people got away alright…  
Louisiana, Louisiana  
They’re tryin’ to wash us away  
They’re tryin’ to wash us away.

Just as during Hurricane Katrina, the 1927 flooding of Southern Louisiana forced thousands of residents from their homes. In the established refugee camps there was a disparity between the treatment of whites and African Americans, which caused a “pervading sense of gloom” in the black camps. Unfortunately, such treatment of African Americans was common in Louisiana at this time. The strong presence of the Ku Klux Klan in Louisiana not only made lynching of blacks a regular occurrence, but also created an extreme bias in the politics of Louisiana.

With the economic crisis, the recent flooding, and the issues of racial inequality plaguing Louisiana during the 1920’s, Huey Long was entering the political world at a crucial time for Southern Louisiana. His plans for reform were undoubtedly idealistic, and at times utterly impractical; however, they offered hope to a people who had reached an ultimate low.

Most famously, Long is known for his Share Our Wealth program, which developed out of his idea that every man should live as a king. Responding to the 1916 statistic that two percent
of the American population owned sixty percent of the country’s wealth, Long proposed that something be done to correct this inequality. Share Our Wealth promised that every person would be afforded the modern conveniences of a home and an automobile in addition to the necessities of life. The idea was that any person or family with an excess of three or four million dollars would have to surrender their additional income to provide for the lower class.

The city of New Orleans, in particular, felt a great economic loss at the beginning of the 1930’s, and consequently, was in need of Long’s help to sustain the business district. The French Quarter had been over-run by a “fraudulent job scheme” that demanded money for the application processes of non-existent jobs. In fact, jobs were so sparse that the city handed out boxes of oranges for residents to sell for profit. Huey Long recognized the financial crisis in New Orleans and used the state’s money to jumpstart the economy and bring the city out from her ruin.

While his opponents condemned him for his populist and communist ideals, his supporters considered Long a divine savior. In 1935, a reporter for the St. Louis Post Dispatch wrote that they people of New Orleans “do not merely vote for him. They worship they ground he walks on. He is part of their religion.” Additionally, in 1934 two Louisiana women wrote to President Roosevelt expressing their religious adoration for Long. The first, Mrs. Katherine Blades, wrote, “He is a God-sent, God-fearing, God protect man. He is like Jesus.” The other, Miss Dorothy Collins, said, “He is…an angel sent by God.” Judging from comments such as these, it is clear that Long was more than just a political figure in Louisiana; he was the state’s savior from financial ruin.

Additionally, on two separate occasions Long was likened to the biblical figure Moses. Just as Moses saved God’s chosen people from Egypt, so too did Long bring the people of
Louisiana out of their suffering. The first occasion was in 1931 when there was a prediction that prices in crops would drop dramatically. In order to help the cotton farmers in Louisiana, Long suggested a halt of cotton production in order to drive up prices. Many New Orleans residents, including the mayor, realized how Long’s plan would greatly benefit the city and its economy. The city showed their support by hosting the “New Orleans Cotton Conference”, which allowed Long to meet with the cotton farmers that he had rescued from financial ruin. The plan was such a success that in 1931 Long received a letter from Louisiana resident, M. McFountain, calling him the “Moses of the cotton farmer”.  

Two years later, in 1933, Gerald Smith, who was both an orator and a strong supporter of Long, gave a speech about Share Our Wealth. Endorsing Long’s idea of equality, he called on God directly for help in carrying out the plan. He said, “Rally us under this young man who came out of the woods of north Louisiana, who leads us like a Moses out of the land of bondage into the land of milk and honey where every man is a king but no one wears a crown.” While the language Smith uses is highly religious, it is not pointing to a particular denomination. Rather, he uses the phrase “like a Moses”, suggesting he is not speaking of a tradition in which there is one Moses figure. Moreover, the addition of the last phrase that describes every man a king, highlights his use of traditional religious themes and his application of them to a civil religion in which every man benefits. He alludes to the biblical exodus, but does so in order that his predominately Christian listeners may be able to understand the characteristics that qualify Long as savior. Bellah does a similar thing when talking about George Washington as “the divinely appointed Moses who led his people out of the hands of tyranny.” Therefore, just as Bellah situates Washington in his pantheon of the American civil religion, so too can Huey Long take
his place as a holy person in the New Orleans civil religion for his active role in ending the suffering of its people.

Additionally, in his speeches—which were filled with unmatched charisma—Huey Long explained his plans in religious language reminiscent of that used by Abraham Lincoln. Bellah cites the Gettysburg Address as a speech in which Lincoln addresses themes that are central to the American civil religion. Lincoln does this by discussing the issue of slavery not only as a moral dilemma, but as an opposition to the will of God. He tells the people that “American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God…He now wills to remove.” 91 Similarly, Long backs up Share Our Wealth by stating that it coincides with divine will. He believed that it “was the judgment and the view and the law of the Lord that we would have to distribute wealth every so often, in order that there could not be people starving to death in a land of plenty.” 92

This excerpt from his speech is extremely important in proving Long’s role as a sacred person in New Orleans civil religion. Not only does he use religious language that is not affiliated with a particular denomination, but he does so in a way that offers a useful critique of society. Moreover, the language that he uses paints an ideal picture of a humanity that lives together peacefully, portraying society as it is related to a transcendent reality that serves to unify the people of Louisiana.

The lofty ideals of Huey Long, however, were unable to reach fulfillment. On September 8, 1935, Long was shot in the Louisiana state capitol and died shortly after. 93 His death was comparable to that of Lincoln’s in that it made him a martyr for Louisiana’s poor and solidified his sacred position in the New Orleans civil religion. Like Bellah’s explanation of Lincoln’s death, Long’s death marked the end of his physical life, but simultaneously allowed his legacy to
live on indefinitely. After his assassination, some “refused to believe he had been shot and killed. To the poor country folk, he was omnipotent and invincible and indeed, immortal.” 94 Three years after his death sociologist Gunnar Myrdal visited Louisiana and discovered that some of the state’s poor believed that Long was “not only still living, but President of the United States”. 95 Although they had seen Long’s body lying in the Capitol’s rotunda, his role as a savior drove the poor to equate him with the superhuman.

Even in recent times, people argue about the death of their beloved politician. While they have come to realize that his death is factual, they have prolonged the debate about its details. In 1992 the Louisiana State Police reopened Huey Long’s case in order to find out what really happened on September 8, 1935. Additionally, the American Academy of Forensic Sciences met in New Orleans to present the evidence that they found concerning his death. The results, which claimed that the accused assassin could not have administered the fatal shot, did little to diminish the aura of mystery surrounding the death of Huey Long. 96

Despite the enemies that Long made throughout his political career, the people of Louisiana still hold onto his legacy. Since his death, his body has remained in the sunken gardens beneath the state capitol, serving as a reminder for state politicians of the success that one man can attain. Additionally, in 1935 the people of New Orleans immortalized the man who saved their city by constructing the Huey P. Long Bridge. The “Huey P.”, as it is currently called, connects the Eastbank and Westbank of New Orleans. While the Eastbank lies on the east side of the Mississippi River and the Westbank on the west, the two parts of the city are divided by more than their natural boundary; the two often compete over the title of the “Bestbank”. Thus, by physically connecting the two parts of the city, even in his death, Huey Long serves as a binding force for the people.
B. Sacred Ritual

While Bellah does not provide a definition for religious ritual, his predecessor, Emile Durkheim, devoted much of his studies to ritual. Restated in the words of religious scholar Daniel Pals, Durkeim defines rituals as

the ‘cult’ (from the Latin *cultus*: ‘worship’), which consists of emotional group ceremonies held on certain occasions, [that are] the very core of the clan’s life together…Their purpose is always to promote consciousness of the clan, to make people feel a part of it, and to keep it in every way separate from the profane.  

The ritual, however, is not always a solemn ceremony, but oftentimes a ceremony with an “effervescent social environment” that excites its participants. Durkheim’s definition of ritual accurately describes two ceremonies in New Orleans: jazz funerals and Mardi Gras. In the following section, I will argue that how both are sacred rituals in the New Orleans civil religion.

Jazz Funerals

The practice of performing jazz funerals in New Orleans may seem bizarre, if not irreverent, to any outsider. They begin in the fashion of a traditional Christian funeral with a church service presided over by a minister and supplemented with reflections from the deceased’s loved ones. After the service, however, the body is brought outside of the church and into the crowd of people that have been awaiting its arrival. The jazz or brass band—which has gathered to honor the dead—begins to play a slow dirge as the crowd starts its procession to the graveyard. As in traditional Christian funerals, people mourn the deceased with tears. Yet, once the body is buried, the crowd changes its mood to one of celebration and the band begins to play cheerful pieces. The people follow behind the band, dancing joyously in what is known as the second line.
Before Hurricane Katrina jazz funerals tended to appeal to a subculture of the larger New Orleans culture, and were held primarily for African Americans and New Orleans musicians. Still, they were celebrations to which anyone was invited. As a result, I will argue that before the storm jazz funerals were a ritualistic celebration that helped the people cope with death on a more personal level, but that in the wake of Katrina the ritual became a symbolic expression of unity that helped the entire city of New Orleans not only to mourn its dead, but also to begin the city’s rebuilding process.

Although the exact origin of the jazz funeral is unknown, the ritual was important in mourning the deceased during the era of slavery. During this period, St. Augustine’s Catholic Church in the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans was one of the only churches that allowed enslaved Africans to worship inside and mourn their dead. Today, the church not only remains the starting point for many jazz funerals, but is also home to the Tomb of the Unknown Slave. As a result, St. Augustine’s is comparable to Arlington National Cemetery as described by Bellah in his essay on civil religion in America. He asserts that Arlington Cemetery was developed as a “ritualistic expression” of the theme of sacrifice that grew out of the civil war. Consequently, it has become a place to mourn the dead, with monuments such as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier established to pay homage to the nameless dead.

Similarly, the Tomb of the Unknown Slave at St. Augustine’s Church serves as a physical symbol of the sacrifice made by African and Native American slaves. Part of the inscription on the dedicatory plaque outside of the church reads:

*The Tomb of the Unknown Slave is a constant reminder that we are walking on holy ground. Thus, we cannot consecrate this tomb, because it is already consecrated by many slaves' inglorious deaths bereft of any acknowledgement, dignity or respect, but ultimately glorious by their blood, sweat, tears, faith, prayers and deep worship of our Creator.*
Due to the inclusion of language such as “holy ground”, “consecrated”, and “worship of our Creator”, it is clear that the Tomb of the Unknown Slave is a religious location for the people of New Orleans. Additionally, since the Tomb of the Unknown Slave is a physical expression of how the people deal with death, it serves as an appropriate starting point for a ritual that helps family and friends cope with the death of a loved one.

Outsiders, however, may question how a jazz funeral can effectively help anyone cope with death when it forces the mourners to change their expressions to ones of joy. Some may wonder if New Orleanians are denying the reality of death and expressing some form of escapism. To this question, Tom Piazza, award-winning author of *Why New Orleans Matters*, dedicates a portion of his book:

> So which is real, the grief or the celebration? Both, simultaneously, and that is why it is profound. You might see a mother dancing behind a casket containing the body of her own dead son, with tears of grief running down her face. Most funeral traditions in our society remind us that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. In New Orleans the funeral reminds us that Life is bigger than any individual life, and it will roll on, and for a short time that your individual life joins the big stream of Life… No individual life lasts forever, and it is the responsibility of those left outside of the walls of the boneyard to keep life going.  

As described by Piazza, New Orleans’ jazz funerals provide a sense of unity amongst the deceased and the mourners by relating the life (lower case “l”) of the deceased with the eternal cycle of Life (upper case “L”). This ritual sends the message that Life does not end simply because one life ends. Consequently, using Bellah’s definition of religion, the jazz funeral is a ritual “act that relates man to the ultimate conditions of his existence” by instilling within man the idea of eternal Life. Furthermore, due to the fact that jazz funerals are ritual expressions with a transcendent meaning unique to the people of New Orleans they are a part of the New Orleans civil religion.
Their central role in New Orleans culture became even more evident in the midst of Hurricane Katrina. Even before the storm hit, David Rutledge, an English professor at the University of New Orleans and editor of the sold-out book, *Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans*, describes his journey out of the city in terms of a jazz funeral. He explains:

> The streets felt empty as I drove to the freeway. In six years of living here I have learned how emptiness, death, in New Orleans, often lends itself to a celebration, perhaps a parade. This is not a style. It is a philosophy, a foundation for a culture. On this night that sense of triumph was missing, and when it comes again, this city should elevate it, place it on a stage. The first trumpet to return wins….The cars moved, not quickly, but they moved, for hours and hours, as I drove through the night, towards Houston. It felt like a three-hundred-mile funeral procession.  

Although temporarily overcome by a sense of despair, describing his departure from New Orleans as the mournful procession of a jazz funeral, Rutledge’s analogy makes clear that he has hope for the future of New Orleans. Due to the fact that he is a part of a society whose civil religion paints an optimistic view of death celebrated through the ritual of jazz funerals, Rutledge can better cope with the disaster at hand. Therefore, it is not a question of “if” triumph returns to New Orleans, but rather a question of “when”. Just as the second line of the jazz funerals instills hope within its mourners, so too will the people’s return to New Orleans. Although overcome by the emptiness and death, New Orleanians will return to the city, joyous as in a second line parade, bringing with them a “sense of triumph” and optimism for their future, for their Life.

Similarly, Douglas Brinkley, a historian at Tulane University who stayed in New Orleans during the hurricane, analyzed the destruction of the city in terms of jazz funerals. In his book, *The Great Deluge*, he says,

> For a city known for festive jazz funerals, the image of corpses on the sidewalks was a blow to the very soul of New Orleans. Although on the Saturday after Katrina, a guitarist in the French Quarter was singing…most of the music was gone from the city. But slowly the jazz funerals would come back. It was just a matter of time. 
Like Rutledge, Douglas Brinkley points out the sorrow that has overcome New Orleans. Yet, he also exhibits optimism for the city’s rebirth, explaining that jazz funerals—a ritualistic expression of the beautiful dichotomy and merging of life and death, joy and sorrow—will return to New Orleans. Brinkley’s comment suggests that while the spirit of New Orleans and its people is devastated, it will ultimately be reversed as it is during jazz funerals.

In fact, Douglas Brinkley could not have been more correct—“it was just a matter of time” before the jazz funerals came back to the city. On October 9, 2005, only a month after the storm, the first post-Katrina jazz funeral was held for New Orleans chef, Austin Leslie. Although the funeral ritual was held in honor of one man, it was a symbolic expression of the city’s return. The New York Times wrote a piece on the event and the author, Shaila Dewan, describes it as follows:

And just after 2 p.m. on the corner of North Broad and St. Bernard, the strains of "Just a Closer Walk With Thee" streamed past the heaps of stinking garbage and fallen roofs like milk and honey and sweet Abita beer, a flash of grandeur and ritual that harked back to a New Orleans past and, many in the crowd swore, future.106

Before Hurricane Katrina, jazz funerals helped relate the past life of the deceased to the future of Life. In post-Katrina New Orleans, however, jazz funerals symbolize something slightly different; the ritual connects the thriving New Orleans of the past with the New Orleans that the people hope to see in the future, simultaneously uniting New Orleanians under a common goal of rebuilding.

Additionally, the language that Dewan uses in describing the music of the jazz funeral supports my claim that it is a ritual in the New Orleans civil religion. She says that “it streamed past the heaps of stinking garbage and fallen roofs like milk and honey and sweet Abita beer”. The phrase “milk and honey” is undoubtedly meant to recall its use in the book of Exodus, where
God uses it to describe to Moses the Promised Land, “abounding in milk and honey”. Additionally, the way it flows past the destruction of the city brings to mind the Exodus, and the Israelites’ journey out of oppression and despair.

While these references point to the existence of a traditional religion, the inclusion of “sweet Abita beer” amongst the milk and honey suggests that this ritual is part of the civil religion. The Abita Brewing Company is a local brewery that not only caters to the taste of New Orleanians, but takes pride in the city’s culture, naming beers after Mardi Gras Indians and, more recently, creating ones to remember catastrophes. Thus, in describing the music of the jazz funeral as streaming like milk, honey, and sweet Abita beer, Dewan is suggesting that it is not a ritual for a traditional religion, but for the civil religion of New Orleans.

In addition to the jazz funeral held immediately after Katrina, there were jazz funerals on the first, third and fifth anniversaries of the storm. On the first anniversary, the jazz funeral was not meant to honor any particular life lost in the storm, but the loss felt by the entire city. An empty coffin was paraded through the streets of New Orleans, followed by people joyously dancing in a second line. New Orleans Mayor, Ray Nagin, commented that the celebration of the first anniversary would be a large step in the rebuilding process.

Although the jazz funeral held in 2006 was meant to commemorate the loss of the entire city, Jacqui Goddard of The Sunday Times claimed that the celebration held on the third anniversary was the “world’s largest jazz funeral”. It was celebrated in order to bury the eighty five New Orleanians who had been left “unclaimed, unwanted, and in some cases, unidentified” in the coroner’s office for three years. The procession was led by Frank Minyard, the coroner who identified the majority of the 1,800 bodies left by Hurricane Katrina. Minyard explained that “It’s sad. We don’t know their names or their stories. But these people deserve their rest. The
music is to show that our dear departed friend or relative is now going on to a more great and glorious reward in Heaven”. Despite the fact that not a single person in New Orleans knew who these people were, New Orleanians gathered together to celebrate their lives, to ensure their proper burial, and to progress one step further on the city’s path to recovery.  

Finally, the jazz funeral that was held this past year on Katrina’s fifth anniversary marked a very important stage in the rebuilding process. Hotel Monteleone, a historic hotel in the French Quarter, hosted the celebration not only to mourn the loss of loved ones, but also to “honor them by celebrating their lives”. Additionally, this jazz funeral was meant to unite the people of New Orleans in a celebration of the “triumphant return of our community”. The procession included an empty coffin, in which people placed “real Katrina era items…to bury for good.” Hotel Monteleone composed a list of sample items that New Orleanians might bring. This included:

1. A scrap of blue tarp, the material which covered so many roofs in New Orleans
2. A Clorox bottle to symbolize the clean-up process
3. A fly swatter, referencing the severe heat and humidity in post-Katrina New Orleans
4. An MRE, military meals that sustained many people after the storm
5. A list of excuses, an obvious political statement about the government’s lack of response to the storm

During this jazz funeral, the people of New Orleans were literally burying Hurricane Katrina and all of the grief that the storm brought. Although it may seem strange to give honor to Katrina by giving her a jazz funeral, the people believed that in order for her to rest peacefully, she must be buried respectfultly. Thus, with the city’s mournful funeral procession completed, New Orleans can partake in the joys of the second line and appreciate the Life that it has been given.
Mardi Gras

The annual New Orleans festival of Mardi Gras, held forty days before the Christian celebration of Easter, is often viewed by outsiders as nothing more than a huge party free of moral standards. While clichés such as intoxicated men and women lining the balconies of Bourbon Street are a part of Mardi Gras, personal accounts show that New Orleanians find deeper meaning in the festival. As New Orleans resident Chris Rose explains,

Mardi Gras is not a parade. Mardi Gras is not girls flashing on French Quarter balconies. Mardi Gras is not an alcoholic binge. … Mardi Gras is the love of life. It is the harmonic convergence of our food, our music, our creativity, our eccentricity, our neighborhoods, and our joy of living. All at once.

While there is debate about the religious dimension of Mardi Gras, Reid Mitchell expresses an interesting viewpoint in his book *All On a Mardi Gras Day*. Mitchell, who spent his undergraduate career at the University of New Orleans before becoming a historian, struggles with classifying Mardi Gras as either a pure religious ritual or pure spectacle. Ultimately, he concludes that “we might think of Carnival activities of individuals and associations—masking, parading, merrymaking—as ‘performance’, while regarding the annual event as a ‘civil ritual.’” Mitchell, however, fails to see the significance of the Mardi Gras “performance”. In the following section, I will argue that while Mardi Gras is not defined by parading and revelry, such acts are part of a ritual of rebellion; this ritual that not only unifies the people of New Orleans, but is also the largest ritual of the New Orleans civil religion.

In his essay on Spanish Carnival, published in *Anthropological Quarterly*, David Gilmore points out that rituals of rebellion were “historically used by the oppressed elements to ventilate their hidden political agenda.” Classifying Carnival as a ritual of rebellion, Gilmore describes how political conflicts in Spain were dealt with in ritualized fashion. In language that could be
easily transposed to a discussion on Mardi Gras, he paints an image of Spanish Carnival during the 1970’s:

Villagers masqueraded, the men usually as transvestites, paraded through the streets, singing gossipy or satirical songs…in some villages organized groups performed minidramas victimizing deviants or lampooning the authorities or the Church. The high point of Andalusian carnival, however, was probably the masked musical bands. The minstrels promenaded through the streets beating their drums and chanting their provocative ditties.\textsuperscript{116}

Although Gilmore’s article does not explicitly discuss the religious dimension of the ritual, the effervescent manner in which it unites the community fits Durkheim’s definition of religious ritual. Additionally, because Carnival offers a ritualized critique on society, it can be classified as a civil ritual.

There is an obvious correlation between Spain’s Carnival and New Orleans’ Mardi Gras, making it easy to classify the latter as a ritual of rebellion. To begin, Mardi Gras provides the parade-goers, as well as those riding on the floats, the opportunity to create an alternate identity through masking that allows them to act in a deviant manner. As Brenda Osbey explains in her essay “One More Last Chance: Ritual and the Jazz Funeral”, masking “allows us to express the unacceptable, unguessed-at, or potentially dangerous aspects of ourselves under the protection—some would say guise—of the other/ masqued self. The understanding is that the wearer is no more responsible for her or his behavior than the masque itself”.\textsuperscript{117}

The costumes of the parade-goers, however, differ greatly from those of the people riding on the floats. Those who are there to watch the parades dress in a variety of costumes. Similar to choosing an outfit for Halloween, the wearer chooses one identity that he or she wishes to assume for the day. Tom Piazza describes the type of costumes that are typical at Mardi Gras:

There are all the obvious cultural heroes and touchstones abroad in the streets—many Marilyn Monroes, many nuns, many schoolgirls in short plaid skirts and hairy legs—along with costumes that defy verbal rendering, masterpieces of avant-garde sculpture and cultural discourse, alongside pink bunny rabbits and
old queen couples who have been together for years who decided to go as Laurel and Hardy this year.\textsuperscript{118}

While these costumes are usually very elaborate, those of the float riders are relatively simple. Typically, they are dressed in monochromatic pants and shirt, with their face covered by a plain, tan mask. It can be suggested that the assumption of a plain mask, an indiscriminate identity, allows for the wearer to take on any particular identity at any given time.\textsuperscript{119}

Yet, despite the type of dress, once the costume is put on, people tend to act in a manner that challenges the standard social code. It seems obvious that this is the reason why many outsiders misinterpret Mardi Gras simply as a day on which morality takes a holiday. As Chris Rose emphatically states it in his book \textit{I Dead in the Attic}, “THEY [THOSE not from New Orleans] think we’re drunk, insouciant, lascivious… THEY show the images of revelers flashing for beads on Bourbon Street as some sort of distasteful microcosm of the libertine life of New Orleanians”.\textsuperscript{120} Rose goes on to speak about the inaccurate media portrayal of New Orleans, and although not blatantly stated, he seems to dig at the same point that I am making: the expression of Mardi Gras may seem absurd and distasteful to those who do not understand that the masking and revelry is a socially contained, effervescent, ritualized expression of rebellion. Thus the \textit{laissez faire} attitude that is so commonly associated with New Orleans is actually describing the momentary, ritualistic suspension of the social code during Mardi Gras—not the “libertine life of New Orleanians”.

Additionally, the floats in the parades speak to the rebellious nature of Mardi Gras. Before Hurricane Katrina many of the floats were decorated to satirize politicians and make witty statements about current events; however, after Hurricane Katrina the people of New Orleans saw Mardi Gras as their opportunity to publically critique the government response to
the storm. In his book, *Down in New Orleans*, Billy Sothern describes some of the satire that was apparent in the first post-Katrina Mardi Gras:

The next float, built to look like a giant Monopoly board, announces the parade’s theme, ‘Muses Got Game, If We Don’t Laugh We Cry,’ in large letters across its side. What followed were twenty parades of games that, like the chapters of a book, summed up much of the city’s experience during and after Hurricane Katrina. The Barrel of Monkeys float depicted a monkey-faced President Bush telling FEMA head Michael Brown, ‘You’re doin’ a heck of a job, Brownie’, as Brownie scratched his monkey butt while trying to choose a tie…The last game float, The Game of Chance, summed up what most people faced as they watched the float pass. While holding in one hand a suitcase decorated with Houston, Florida, and Alabama destination stamps, with his other hand a man was rolling a dice, on the side of which were written: ‘political corruption continues’, ‘Blanco, Nagin reelected’, ‘looters’, and ‘criminals return’.121

Strongly recalling Gilmore’s description of Carnival as a ritual of rebellion, the oppressed New Orleanians ritually expressed their desire for a different and more effective approach to dealing with the disaster brought by Katrina.

However, in addition to being a socially contained rebellion, Mardi Gras effectively unifies New Orleans. For example, the parades that travel throughout the city symbolize the dismissal of social, economic and racial boundaries and point towards a unified city. While the parades often inspire competition between float krewes for the title of best in show or between parade-goers fighting for the best viewing spot, Mitchell indicates that “Carnival also serves New Orleans as a ritual integration”. For, while it “provides a chance for competition and assertion, it is chance offered to everyone.”122 Moreover, the competition is never rewarded with prizes, allowing for it to take place in a more lighthearted manner. Thus, such competition during the parades allows for the people of New Orleans to come together for the common purpose of celebration.

The unification of the city is also symbolically portrayed through the route of the parades. Traditionally, the parades begin in the upper-class, white neighborhoods and run through
downtown New Orleans into the French Quarter and surrounding neighborhoods, which are predominately African American. Although the route has been altered slightly in recent years, the parade still runs through all of these neighborhoods. In their essay, “Every Man a King: Worldview, Social Tensions, and Carnival in New Orleans”, Frank de Caro and Tom Ireland assert that the parade route was created as such to bind “together the disparate worlds of the city”123. The parades provide the rare opportunity for the city to dismiss social and racial boundaries, allowing all the people to be bound together.

In his book, Why New Orleans Matters, Tom Piazza not only portrays the social unity that is symbolized through the civil ritual of Mardi Gras parades, but also captures how this symbol relates to the people of New Orleans. He describes the parade watching experience as follows:

> Every night, people from every class and neighborhood make plans to meet ‘at Bacchus’ or for the Endymion (two of the most popular parades), picking a corner to meet, bringing food and drinks in coolers, and often ladders with specially constructed boxes in which children sit to catch the beads and trinkets that spew from the parade floats like water from the fountain of life itself.124

The first striking aspect of Piazza’s account is how he recognizes that the parades have the ability to break down social barriers, welcoming “people from every class and neighborhood”. Additionally, the imagery that he uses to describe the throwing of beads —how they “spew from the parade floats like water from the fountain of life itself”—indicates that the parades posses a hidden symbolism for the people of New Orleans. While Piazza recognizes the deeper meaning, his description of the other participants suggests that they do not overtly recognize the symbolism. Still, Piazza’s interpretation of the Mardi Gras parades are valuable. He asserts that the floats are not simply large decorated boxes pulled by trucks, but are symbols of life. Moreover, the beads are not just fun souvenirs, but rather symbols of how the same life is distributed to everyone, regardless of class or race.
While Piazza’s account paints an idealistic picture of New Orleans society, it strengthens the argument that Mardi Gras is a civil ritual for the city of New Orleans. Due to the fact that outside of the Mardi Gras celebration not everyone is dealt the same lot in life, the temporary suspension of social constraints indicates, as Reid Mitchell claims, that Mardi Gras is set “apart from the normal world we usually inhabit”\(^{125}\). It allows for the ritualistic expression of unity and equality that, although sought after, is not always apparent in New Orleans.

Additionally, Piazza’s description of attending a parade suggests that it is a civil ritual. He says:

> There is nothing better than standing out there, among friends known and unknown, appreciating the pure thereness and nowness of the moment, which you experienced last year and you hope to experience again next year, a thereness and nowness that hovers above the street level of contingency and passing time, and connects you back to a place that is the ground of being itself. And maybe while you are hovering there, vibrating to the frequency, to which everyone else is tuned, too, you will hear the tambourines and drums from way down the block, the chanted refrains: Gonna take my gang on Mardi Gras day…\(^{126}\)

To begin, Piazza’s expression of the “thereness and nowness” suggests that while at Mardi Gras he is able to transcend his everyday (false) reality and enter a sublime (true) reality, by relinquishing all other things that are not present at that moment. This idea is furthered by his description of how the “thereness and nowness hovers above the street level of contingency and passing time”. Piazza paints a literal imagery of transcendence through his use of “hovers” and conceptual one through his description of the suspension of time.

In his essay “Between Religion and Science”, Bellah discusses concepts of reality and delusions. He claims that through religion one can comprehend true reality, and that a better understanding of reality can complement our scientific understanding of the world. He explains that “the world of everyday reality is a socially and personally constructed world. If one confuses that world with reality itself one then become’s trapped in one’s own delusions.” Many of the
world’s religions are aware of this false reality as well as the threat of living a delusional existence and have sought to address this dilemma through some “transcendental experience”. In this light, Piazza’s account of Mardi Gras, which suggests his departure from everyday reality as well as his recognition of a more sublime reality, seems to have a strong religious dimension of transcendence.

Moreover, the last sentence in his account—“And maybe while you are hovering there, vibrating to the frequency, to which everyone else is tuned in”—suggests that his transcendental experience is shared with his fellow New Orleanians. He is not hovering above everyone else, but rather they are all hovering together in an alternate reality, sharing in the annual ritual experience of Mardi Gras. Additionally, since this experience is described using religious language, but does not point directly to any religious tradition, it furthers the argument that the celebration of Mardi Gras is a ritual of New Orleans civil religion.

After Hurricane Katrina there was doubt over whether or not Mardi Gras, scheduled for six months in the future, would take place. Chris Rose, the author of *I Dead in the Attic*, a compilation of essays on post-Katrina New Orleans, asks in a somewhat rhetorical manner, “Will the first post-K Mardi Gras serve to reinvigorate civic pride and community cheer and our sense of spirit and renewal?” Writing before the start of the festival, he encouraged the New Orleans people—whether in the city or dispersed throughout the country—to continue the celebration of Mardi Gras. He explains:

We are the parade. We are Mardi Gras… If you are stuck somewhere else, in some other town. Bring it to them. If you’ve got a job somewhere else now, take off that Tuesday and get all the New Orleanians you know and gather in a park somewhere and cook up a mass of food and put some music on a box and raise a little hell. And raise a glass to us, brothers and sisters, because we’re in here fighting this fight and we’ll raise a glass to you because you cannot be here with us and we know you want to…Fly the flag. Be that number. This is our battle to win or lose. Hopefully, of one mind and message. That we are still here. And that we are still New Orleans.
Despite the fact that they may not have a city in which to celebrate Mardi Gras, the festival is still able to unify the people of New Orleans during one of the city’s greatest times of sorrow. Encouraging people to act as they normally would at Mardi Gras, he assures them physical location will not prevent them from being together “of one mind and message”.

This passage becomes even more interesting if we read “parade” and “Mardi Gras” not for their literal meanings, but for their symbolic ones discussed suggested by Piazza. For Rose, the parade is a symbol for life itself, while the festival as a whole is a symbol for unity. Thus, by saying, “We are the parade. We are Mardi Gras.”, he is suggesting a deeper meaning: “We are alive. We are unified.” Answering the question he posed earlier, due to the strong symbolism behind Mardi Gras as well as its ability to help New Orleanians understand and deal with their present existence, the first “post-K” Mardi Gras did successfully reinvigorate civic pride and New Orleans’ sense of spirit.

Through its symbolic meaning, Mardi Gras was able to unify New Orleans and give the city the opportunity to collectively abandon their sorrows brought about by Katrina. In his book, Billy Sothern discusses the first Mardi Gras after the hurricane. In particular, he talks about Muses, a parade “named after the nine goddesses of Greek mythology who evoke and inspire the arts”. Interestingly, in order to elucidate the true meaning of the parade, he quotes a part of Hesiod’s *Theogony*, a Greek text that explains the role of the divine:

> For it is through the Muses and far-shooting Apollo that there are singers and harpers upon the earth…Happy is he whom the Muses love: sweet flows speech from his mouth. For though a man have sorrow and grief in his newly troubled soul and live in dread because his heart is distressed, yet, when a singer, servant of the Muses, chants the glorious deeds of men of old and the blessed gods who inhabit Olympus, at once he forgets his heaviness and remembers not his sorrows at all; but the gifts of the goddesses soon turn him away from these.
Simply stated, through art, music in particular, the Muses give man the ability to forget his troubles and begin the healing process.

According to Sothern, during the first Mardi Gras after Katrina, the Muses parade not only took on the name of the goddesses, but seemed to embody their ideals of healing. Although to an outsider, art may not appear as a forerunner in the healing process after Katrina, the culture of New Orleans is enlivened by art—the art of music, cooking, dancing, and parading to name a few. Thus, due to the strong role that Mardi Gras plays in the civil religion of New Orleans, its first celebration after Katrina was not only able to unify the city through civil ritual, but was also able to aid the people in the healing process.

C. Sacred Place: New Orleans

In “Civil Religion in America”, Bellah describes Arlington National Cemetery as a sacred place for Americans because it is home to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the eternal flame of the Kennedys and the graves of America’s martyred dead. These inclusions make the cemetery a space where Americans can gather to celebrate the theme of sacrifice that was born out of the Civil War and has become a central theme in American civil religion. Additionally, his essay suggests that America, itself, is a sacred place, due to its central role in the civil religion. Similarly, I shall argue that the civil religion of New Orleans claims the city as a sacred place. Using personal written accounts about New Orleans as well as spoken accounts transmitted through the unique style of New Orleans music, I will demonstrate that the city is a sacred place for the New Orleans civil religion and that in the aftermath of Katrina it became a space where New Orleanians could celebrate the new theme of rebirth.
Written Accounts

After Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans, many local authors redirected their work to discuss the need for their city and its culture to be saved. One author in particular, Tom Piazza, wrote *Why New Orleans Matters*, which received the Humanities Book of the Year Award from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities as well as the Best Book Award from the New Orleans-Gulf South Booksellers Association. Piazza created the book to address the following questions, which are posed in the book’s first chapter:

What is it about New Orleans that makes it more than just the sum of the events that have happened here? What gives it a meaning and a soul so that it is known throughout the world as a place to visit to revive the spirit…What is the meaning of a place like that, and what is lost if it is lost?¹³²

In the following one hundred and eighty pages of the book, Piazza discusses nearly every aspect of New Orleans culture—some of the more prominent being Mardi Gras, jazz funerals and New Orleans music. Piazza claims that New Orleans culture is a “religious attitude” and that its unique celebrations are a part of a “ritual in which the finiteness, the specificity and fragility and durability and richness and earthiness and sadness and laughter of life, are all mixed together, honored, and given tangible from in sound, movement, and communal cuisine.”¹³³ Although he does not use the term “civil religion” to describe New Orleans religious culture, the language that he uses makes clear that Piazza would agree with what I have identified thus far as a New Orleans civil religion.

Moreover, Piazza indicates that the religious culture of New Orleans is directly linked to the city as a place. In describing the traditional role that Mardi Gras played prior to Katrina, Piazza points out how H&R Bar remained the meeting spot for the Wild Magnolia Mardi Gras Indians despite the fact that the actual building was destroyed by fire. For Piazza, the retention of H&R as a meeting place for Mardi Gras demonstrates New Orleanians’ attachment to tradition,
“which is fused to a sense of place, to the ground itself.” For the Wild Magnolia Indians, it was not the H&R building that held a special meaning, but rather the ground on which the building stood. This aspect of New Orleans’ culture has been especially important in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Although the people of New Orleans have been saddened by the destruction of their homes, stores, and other physical structures, the space where the city once thrived still exists, providing people the opportunity to rebuild their lives and revive their sacred rituals. Thus, to answer Piazza’s question, “What is the meaning of a place like that?”, I point to the integral role that the sacred place of New Orleans plays in the city’s civil religion and, therefore, the rebirth of New Orleans.

Jason Berry, another New Orleans author, expresses the sacredness of New Orleans in his essay, “The Holy City of New Orleans.” Although he gained initial recognition in 1992 for his book on the Catholic Church—*Lead Us Not Into Temptation*—Berry has become a notable New Orleans scholar due to his more recent publications on the city’s cultural history. Written less than a year after Katrina, “The Holy City of New Orleans” attempts to piece together the vestiges of New Orleans culture amidst the destruction of the city. Berry gives a personal account of Hurricane Katrina, discussing the things that made New Orleans special to him and which he will greatly miss if the city does not rebuild. He fondly recounts his life in New Orleans: “I loved the way black women called men my age ‘baby’ and the lazy rhythms of the calliope blowing off the river; I treasured the second line parades and the funerals and the bonds I had with so many musicians about whom I wrote for years… the town was held together by a spiritual essence few cities in this country possess.” Berry’s account of his life in New Orleans indicates that he felt a deep connection to the city. It is particularly interesting, however, that Berry’s connection with New Orleans was not formed from a traditional religious experience, nor was his classification of
New Orleans as a holy city speaking to the religious nature of the city; instead Berry calls New Orleans a holy city because of its sacred culture.

Although he wrote this essay during a time in which he was repairing his flooded home, Berry was able to maintain an optimistic outlook. He says, “Each day one sees a new stirring of life, another restaurant opened, lights on in another house. How many people will return? What kind of city will it be… for now and perhaps forever I will think of you, my dear sweet flooded place, as what you were and are in my heart—the holy city of New Orleans.”

Despite the fact that little progress had been made in rebuilding the city, Berry’s statement connects the culturally thriving city of the past (“what you were”) with the presently flooded city (“and are”). It is not only clear that he is confident in the rebirth of the city, but that this confidence stems from his participation in the religious culture of New Orleans and his drive to preserve the sacred place of the civil religion—the holy city of New Orleans.

**Musical Accounts**

In addition to written accounts of New Orleans as a sacred place, I am also going to demonstrate how New Orleans music supports my claim that the city is a sacred place in the civil religion. Music has played a large role in New Orleans culture since the founding of the city. In his most recent work, *Up From the Cradle of Jazz: New Orleans Music Since World War II*, Jason Berry acknowledges that “so much of the popular music that poured out of New Orleans was music about the city—a line of memory about people, customs, homicides, sex, and place-names, captured in lyric and rhythms excavated from this alluring spiritual earth.”

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many people feared that the unique music culture of New Orleans would not be able to survive the destruction of the city. For example, John Goolsby, a
music professor at Loyola University in New Orleans, claims that the city’s music is “on life support”. While the New Orleans music scene has not reached its pre-Katrina status, the city still considers music as a large part of its culture. In fact, music has played a crucial role in the rebuilding process. By examining the music of three of New Orleans most famous musicians—Louis Armstrong, Fats Domino and Dr. John—I will show that before Hurricane Katrina their music portrayed New Orleans as a sacred place, and that after the storm their songs introduced a theme of rebirth into the New Orleans civil religion.

Despite the fact that Louis Armstrong died in 1971, his music still lives on and continues to contribute to New Orleans culture. Armstrong, also known throughout the nation as Satchmo, was born in 1901 in New Orleans. Although he moved to Chicago early in his music career, Armstrong not only “transformed the instrumental dynamics of early jazz”\(^\text{139}\), but always remembered his southern roots. Many of his songs pay tribute to his home city of New Orleans. There are two songs in particular that speak to the special role that the city of New Orleans played in Armstrong’s life—“Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans” and “When the Saints Go Marching In”.

Although less popular than some of his other released songs, “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans” grasps Armstrong’s feelings about being away from the city that he loved. Some of the song lyrics are as follows:

\begin{verbatim}
Do you know what it means
To miss New Orleans?
And miss it each night and day
I know I’m not wrong
The feeling’s getting stronger
The longer I stay away…
The Mardi Gras
The memories
Of Creole tunes that fill the air
\end{verbatim}
Rhetorically asking his listeners to sympathize with his longing, Armstrong describes why he
misses the city. He points to musical celebrations and festivities such as Mardi Gras that are a
central part of New Orleans culture. This song not only implies that these cultural celebrations
have a deep personal meaning to Armstrong, but that they are also connected with New Orleans
as a place. Living in Chicago, Armstrong is unable to partake in these rituals. Thus, the city of
New Orleans becomes the sacred place where he can be a part of the New Orleans culture that he
longs for.

After the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, Armstrong’s song took on a new meaning for
the people of New Orleans who were forced to leave their city as refugees. In 2006, Chin Music
Press released a book entitled “Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orle

The book is
a compilation of short essays on aspects of New Orleans culture and society that are greatly
missed by those no longer in the city. The book is organized in a symbolic manner that speaks to
the theme of rebirth. The first section of the book is labeled, “The Dirge”, which recalls the
mournful song played in jazz funerals. This portion is filled with stories of people’s preparation
for the hurricane, their journeys out of the city and their return to the destruction. The second
section, called “The Return”, tells of people’s first experiences in post-Katrina New Orleans.
Although destruction is an inevitable topic, this section maintains a more optimistic outlook,
recalling the attitude evoked by the second line. The last part of the book is called the
“Lagniappe”, which is a French Louisiana word for a small gift given to a customer by a vendor.
The “Lagniappe” of this book tells of a man’s experience at Mardi Gras that accurately captures
a snapshot of a thriving New Orleans culture. The book takes the reader through a symbolic
mourning process, ultimately, giving back to the reader through the symbolic restoration of New
Orleans’ most important ritual celebration.
In addition to inspiring the creation of a book, Armstrong’s song also became the background music to many post-Katrina videos of the city. There is one video in particular, posted on the video website YouTube in 2006, that highlights how the song was used in coping with the disaster. The video begins with “beautiful and haunting images” of post-Katrina New Orleans, highlighting the desolate feeling in the city. However, a minute into the song, the video fades out on a picture of St. Louis Cathedral in the French Quarter, the music dies away and the word “REBIRTH” fills the screen. Then, in the true nature of New Orleans culture, an upbeat brass band song begins as images of joyous New Orleanians fill the screen, furthering the message of rebirth. It is almost as if the question that Armstrong is posing with the title of his song is no longer rhetorical. In the wake of Katrina, people answered this question. As exiles, they know what it means to miss New Orleans, and in response to this feeling, they will rebuild the city that means so much to them. 141

Because Armstrong was “the first jazz icon [and remains] the public face of the music to this day”142, it is not surprising that another of his songs has been extremely influential in New Orleans culture. The song, “When the Saints go Marching In” began as a black spiritual, but took on new meaning in 1966 when the New Orleans’ superdome became home to The Saints football team. In 1983, Aaron Neville, another famous New Orleans musician, updated Armstrong’s song, literally giving voice to the football team that had by this time gained immense popularity amongst New Orleanians. In addition to its usual lyrics (“Lord I want to be in that number/ When the Saints go marching in), Neville’s version incorporated a chorus of Saints team members singing, “who dat say de gonna beat dem saints?” 143

Just as “Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans”, this Armstrong song took on a deeper meaning after Hurricane Katrina. During the storm, the Superdome, which usually
held thousands of cheerful Saints fans, became home to thousands of refugees and a symbol of the city’s despair. However, in 2009, after repairs had been made to the building, the Saints took to the field and won the national football title. After this victory, the Superdome transformed into a symbol of hope and unity, bringing New Orleans closer together in its “determination to rebuild rather than leave”.  

Additionally, “When the Saints Go Marching In” became a song that symbolized the rebirth of the city, igniting the people of New Orleans each time it was played at football games. Jason Berry offers an eloquent synopsis of what Armstrong’s song means for the city: “And in the Crescent City, people bruised by floods…are united as never before, on a spiritual quest for the promised land, marching to the sacred beat.” While some may read this promised land as future Saints victories, I believe that the spiritual quest is meant to lead the city to a greater victory—the rebirth of their sacred city. How will New Orleans be reborn? By marching together to the sacred beat of Louis Armstrong’s “When the Saints Go Marching In”.

Following in Armstrong’s footsteps, Fats Domino entered the New Orleans music scene in the 1950’s and continues to influence New Orleans music and culture. One of his most notable songs is “Walking to New Orleans”, which tells the story of a heartbroken youth who decides to leave his lover and walk to New Orleans:

I’ve got no time for talkin’
I’ve got to keep on walkin’
New Orleans is my home
That’s the reason why I’m gone
Yes I’m walkin’ to New Orleans

Although this narrative is undoubtedly fictional, it speaks of New Orleans as a place of comfort and refuge—a place where one can escape the world outside.

In another of his songs entitled, “Mardi Gras in New Orleans”, Fats Domino sings about the city’s largest ritual celebration. Despite the fact that his language does not suggest a religious
interpretation of the ritual, it does speak to the uniqueness of the celebration. A portion of the lyrics is as follows:

Well I’m goin to New Orleans  
I’m gonna see the Mardi Gras  
And when I get to New Orleans  
I wants to know what’s carnival for

The way in which Fats Domino speaks about Mardi Gras suggests that he (or whoever he is speaking for) is intrigued by its celebration. The reason he is going to New Orleans is not simply to experience Mardi Gras, but to “know what’s carnival for”, to discover the meaning behind the ritual celebration. Consequently, the only place to discover this meaning is to visit the city that is home to this celebration—New Orleans.

Through his musical success Fats Domino has become a New Orleans icon. Before Katrina, his house in the Lower Ninth Ward, decorated with awards and musical paraphernalia, was a physical testimony to his legendary status. However, when Katrina hit and the Lower Ninth Ward was left as floating debris, many people believed that Fats Domino, “the musical heartbeat of the Big Easy”\textsuperscript{147}, had perished along with it. Yet, before a jazz funeral could be held in his honor, Fats Domino appeared safely in Baton Rouge, having been rescued by a boat crew. In fact, the musical heartbeat of the city was more than safe; he was “alive and kickin’”—a phrase that became the title of his 2006 album.

Recorded at the age of 78, one of the songs speaks to his Katrina experience. Ensuring the people of his well-being, he sings,

All over the country  
People want to know  
Whatever happened to Fats Domino  
Well I’m alive and kickin’  
I’m alive and kickin’  
I’m alive and kickin’  
And I’m where I wanna be
Fats Domino’s new album and this song in particular speaks for all New Orleanians in the way he expresses his joy for being back in the city he loves. Moreover, Domino’s story of supposed death and resurrection seems to parallel that of the city. Rick Coleman, author of Domino’s biography, Blue Monday, points out that the musician is “a perfect symbol for the city. After all, who better personified the survival of New Orleans and its music than Antoine “Fats” Domino?" Just as Fats Domino is “alive and kickin”, so too is New Orleans. Having risen from the flood waters, both are ready to tell the world that they’re not going anywhere.

With the exception of Fats Domino, perhaps no one speaks more fondly of New Orleans and the prospect of rebirth than Mac Rebennack. Growing up in the transitional stages between blues and rock n’ roll, Mac Rebennack, also known as Dr. John, has created a unique sound that has greatly diversified New Orleans’ music culture. Throughout his career, Dr. John has been the recipient of five Grammy Awards and was recently inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Although his success has taken him to New York City, Dr. John’s music focuses primarily on New Orleans culture. His lyrics are filled with descriptions of the city as well as its celebrations. Whole songs are dedicated to Mardi Gras Indians\textsuperscript{149}, the New Orleans’ musical venues\textsuperscript{150}, and the celebration of Mardi Gras\textsuperscript{151}.

Additionally, like Louis Armstrong and Fats Domino, Dr. John creates music that highlights the importance of New Orleans as a place. One of his songs, “Going Back to New Orleans”, tells of his desire to return home. It begins,

\texttt{Going Back Home fen an e ("let me tell you")}
\texttt{To the land of the beautiful queen}
\texttt{Going back to my baby}
\texttt{Goin back to New Orleans}

The song goes on to name all of the things about New Orleans to which he is excited to return. Included in this list is New Orleans and Creole cuisine and the celebration of Mardi Gras;
primarily, however, Dr. John emphasizes his excitement about returning home. For him, the city is not simply a geographical place, but a space that he feels strongly connected to. Throughout the song he personifies New Orleans, giving the city affectionate titles such as “the land of the beautiful queen” and “my baby”. Thus, through his song, he gives life to New Orleans.

Dr. John paints a similar picture of the city in his song ‘Sweet Home New Orleans’. Released less than three months after Katrina, this song was meant to remind its listeners why New Orleans must be rebuilt. Avoiding the topic of destruction, the song compels New Orleanians to replace their despair with memories of what the city used to be and will be again in the future:

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Sweet home New Orleans
I can sure ‘nough hear you callin’
Feel that gentle wind before me…
And I know you Mardi Gras
You want a second line
From the Garden District
Out down to that Lower Nine…
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Just as in “Going Back to New Orleans”, Dr. John personifies his beloved city, giving her a voice to call back her people. Additionally, although subtle, he paints a picture of unity through his mention of the Mardi Gras second line. As discussed in the chapter on Mardi Gras as a sacred ritual, the parade route winds through the upper, white class neighborhoods (i.e. the Garden District) and into the lower, black neighborhoods (i.e. the Lower Ninth Ward), symbolically unifying the city. In “Sweet Home New Orleans”, Dr. John seems to highlight the essential need for unity in the wake of Katrina.

In addition to this album released in 2006, Dr. John also released an album in 2008 entitled, “The City that Care Forgot”. Different from his approach in “Sweet Home New Orleans”, this album addresses the problems that the city faces after Katrina. Still, the songs send a message of hope to the people. One song, entitled “My People Need a Second Line”, discusses
how New Orleanians approached the issue of death after the storm. A portion of the song is as follows:

My people need a second line…
And I can hear their spirits cryin’
They want a second line
Down in New Orleans
Everybody knows
Lord you get a second line
When you go
Been that way for over hundred years
That’s how we deal with death and fear
How we smile
Don’t be cryin’
Lord my people need a second line…

Although the topic of the song is somber, like a jazz funeral, it leaves the listener cheerful and optimistic. The portion quoted above is sung to a slow dirge, much like that played during the procession of the jazz funeral to the grave. Then, as if giving the people of New Orleans what they need, the beat transforms into an upbeat brass melody—the same type which is played in the second line of jazz funerals. Dr. John is acknowledging the sorrow of death, proposing a solution that would effectively address the people’s sorrow, and ultimately, providing them with this solution. Through his music, Dr. John is not only suggesting the rebirth of New Orleans, but beginning the rebirth process.
V. Conclusion

Throughout my paper, I have argued for an interpretation of New Orleans culture as a civil religion. In order to present my argument, I used Robert Bellah’s theory of an American civil religion, selecting the holy people, sacred rituals and sacred places in New Orleans. For the sake of brevity, I limited my discussion of these cultural aspects to either one or two examples each. By being able to successfully apply Bellah’s theory of civil religion to the culture of New Orleans, I believe I have highlighted the usefulness of his theory. Without the theory of a civil religion, we would be left with a superficial understanding of the New Orleanian reaction to Hurricane Katrina.

However, my approach to studying the civil religion of New Orleans suggests some revisions of Bellah’s theory. First, Bellah’s essay lacks a structured presentation of the argument, not only making it difficult to grasp his main points, but also allowing for one aspect of civil religion to be discussed more thoroughly than another. This is evident in the lack of discussion that he offers on sacred place. While he mentions that sacred place is an important aspect of civil religion, he dedicates only one paragraph to the importance of Arlington National Cemetery. In my approach I attempted to state my points in a clear and logical manner, devoting equal discussion to each facet of New Orleans civil religion. Additionally, Bellah’s theory is based solely off of his interpretation of American culture; he offers no evidence that the sentiment of the American people supports his theory. As a result, I supported my argument with accounts of New Orleans citizens.

I began my discussion of the New Orleans civil religion with its holy people, using Louisiana Governor Huey P. Long as an example. By comparing Long to Abraham Lincoln, as discussed by Bellah, I discovered that throughout their political careers both men assumed a
religious aura. In particular, I discussed Long’s role as savior to the Louisiana people through his Share Our Wealth plan. This policy, although radical, served to alleviate the financial burden on the poor. As a result many Louisianians, and New Orleanians in particular, viewed him as savior, likening him to biblical figures such as Moses.

I next discussed sacred rituals in the New Orleans civil religion, arguing that two of New Orleans’ celebrations, jazz funerals and Mardi Gras, are sacred rituals. Both fit Emile Durkheim’s definition of ritual as something that unifies a community in an effervescent ceremony. Moreover, they align with Bellah’s definition of civil ritual as an act that ritually expresses important themes in the civil religion. Jazz funerals accomplish these tasks by unifying New Orleanians in a ritualized mourning process that points to a unique understanding of Life. Mardi Gras, on the other hand, can be defined as a ritual of rebellion that brings New Orleanians together to satirically critique their society. Both rituals, however, have been very important in rebuilding New Orleans—jazz funerals helping in the mourning process and Mardi Gras reinvigorating civic pride and allowing for effective criticism of the government’s response to the disaster.

Finally, I argued that New Orleans is a sacred place in the city’s civil religion. By using both written and musical accounts, I highlighted the important role that the city plays in the life of New Orleanians. The written accounts suggest that the city is sacred not because of the strong presence of traditional religion, but because of its culture. The musical accounts of Louis Armstrong, Fats Domino and Dr. John highlight the importance of the city. Perhaps more importantly, however, they have also been extremely influential in the rebirth of New Orleans.

The data that I gathered to argue for an interpretation of New Orleans culture as civil religion provides a better understanding of the New Orleanians’ reaction to Hurricane Katrina.
Unlike Gary Stern’s book, which only provided interviews with the leaders of religious traditions, my paper gives voice to the people of New Orleans. Furthermore, these voices speak in contradiction to the dehumanization that the media portrayed in the wake of storm. From my data, it becomes clear that the people of New Orleans are not simply looters, murderers or rapists, but rather, a people with a deep religious culture that is just as valid as any other religious tradition.

Tom Piazza speaks to this idea, describing the unique and lively culture of New Orleans, as a “religious attitude”. As if searching for the term “civil religion”, he describes New Orleans culture with religious language, while simultaneously rejecting its classification as a traditional religion. In describing the culture, he says,

> It’s not the stern Calvinist religion of judgment and renunciation of New England, nor does it have anything in common with some virulent new strains of fundamentalism in which the fondest hope is that Our God, whatever His name is, Blessed Be His Name, will come and Really Kick Some Ass and wipe all the crud and leave only the elect. Nor does it have anything to do with the false and obscene pieties mouthed by those for whom Jesus is just another means to get power and votes and government and contracts. Its fruits are given freely, in an expression and an imitation of the generosity of creation itself, and very often by the humblest people in the community. But it is appreciated by all who have ears to hear and eyes to see and tongues to taste and hearts to love. And once you love you cannot turn your back.152

Piazza notes that the main distinction between the “religious attitude” of New Orleans culture and that represented in other religious traditions is the way in which New Orleans culture gives back to and enlivens its people. He believes that it is for this reason that people’s entire beings—ears, eyes, tongues and hearts—are consumed by the New Orleans culture, the New Orleans spirit. Additionally, because this spirit is so much a part of New Orleanians, they will never turn their backs on the city. They will move back to New Orleans, rebuild their homes, rebuild their lives and reinvigorate the religious culture that is embedded within them.
In the wake of Hurricane Katrina many people doubted the city’s return. However, Roger Abraham was correct in his assumption that “unlike the Phoenix, New Orleans will rise from the mud, not ashes, after a trial by water and un-benign political neglect, not by fire. The future of an authentic Land of Dreams is in the hopes and will of the people.”¹⁵³ For those who were either part of the New Orleans civil religion or familiar with the city’s strong culture, the rebirth of the city was never a question; it was simply a matter of time. The people, who are united through their beliefs in the same holy people, their celebrations of the same sacred rituals and their ties to the same sacred land, were sure to return to their “holy city of New Orleans”.¹⁵⁴

Interestingly, the approach of studying the religious culture of an area affected by natural disasters as a means to help in the rebuilding process, is not limited to the scope of Hurricane Katrina. Currently, Japan is suffering from the March 27th earthquake and tsunami that devastated the country. Just as in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, people were attempting to decide God’s role in the natural disaster. Shintaro Ishihara, the governor or Tokyo, declared publicly that the tsunami was divine retribution for the “egoism and populism” of the Japanese people.¹⁵⁵ In the words of Japanese journalist, Yuki Miyamoto, “natural disasters… activate our religious imaginations”¹⁵⁶, driving people to look for answers for the unexplainable.

However, theodicy was not the only religious topic that has been debated since the tsunami hit Japan. In addition to destroying homes and businesses, the 2011 tsunami has caused severe damage to the Fukushima nuclear power plant. The meltdown of Fukushima poses a severe threat to the people of Japan through exposure to radiation. Understanding the danger of the situation and the need for action, a group of local residents have come together to battle the nuclear plant’s fires. Dubbed the “Fukushima 50”, the members of this group—“evinc[ing] a will to sacrifice themselves on behalf of their country”—have gained status as saviors. As Miyamoto
explains, many Japanese believe that their nation is sacred, and that those who die for its sake are saviors. 157

In his article, Miyamoto calls these Japanese religious sentiments nationalistic, lumping them together in what she calls the “religio-political tradition”. She asserts that the blatant nationalism in Japan is dangerous because it causes the citizens to believe that their sacred country is infallible. Furthermore, Miyamoto expresses the belief that glorifying the Fukushima 50 is not only pointless, but potentially detrimental to Japan, because it distracts from discussions of the real problems. 158

Unfortunately, Miyamoto seems to be mistaking the Japanese civil religion for nationalism—a problem that many of Robert Bellah’s readers faced when his first edition of “Civil Religion in America” was published. Additionally, Miyamoto is wrong in believing that the religious sentiments of the people pose a threat to the addressing the environmental problems that surround the destruction of the power plant. In fact, if she were to understand how civil religion offers a critique of society, expressed in religious language and symbols, she would realize that the two coexist.

By using the example of Hurricane Katrina and the civil religion of New Orleans, however, one can argue that the discussion of civil religion in the wake of disasters is not only natural, but effective in restoring hope to the devastated people. Instead of using jazz funerals to conceptualize the sorrow, the people of Japan are turning to a theme of sacrifice that seems to be embedded within their civil religion. Just as the theme of rebirth—symbolized in a variety of forms after Hurricane Katrina—helped New Orleanians find the strength to rebuild, so too will the theme of sacrifice drive the Japanese to continue to fight for what is important to them: their
nation and its religious culture. In both cases, it is clear that in the midst of disaster and times of hardship, civil religion makes it so that there “ain’t no drownin’ the spirit.”
Endnotes

2. Mark Fischetti as Quoted in Brinkley, 2006, 14.
4. Ibid., 255-261.
7. Ibid., 7.
9. Stern, 82.
10. Ibid., 65.
11. Ibid., 67.
12. Ibid., 67.
13. Ibid., 68.
14. Ibid., 79.
15. Ibid., 77.
16. Dyson, 185.
17. Ibid., 186.
19. Ibid., 87.
20. Ibid., 88.
21. Ibid., 91.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 2.
29. Stern, 104.
30. Ibid., 112.
31. Ibid., 113.
32. Ibid., 113.
33. Ibid., 119.
34. Ibid., 121.
40. Ibid., 145.
41. Ibid., 129- 130.
42. Ibid., 131.
43. Ibid., 132.
44. Ibid., 132.
45 Dyson, 194.
46 Ibid., 195.
48 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 150.
52 Daniel Pals, 86.
54 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 6.
57 Ibid., 10.
58 Ibid., 12.
59 Ibid., 10.
60 Ibid., 168.
61 Ibid., 171.
62 Ibid., 169.
63 Ibid., 171.
64 Ibid., 54. For clarifying Robert Bellah’s theory, I also want to acknowledge the help of Harvey Markowitz and Ken White.
65 Ibid., 45.
66 Ibid., 45.
67 Ibid., 45.
68 Ibid., 174.
69 Ibid., 48.
70 Ibid., 49.
71 Pals, 96.
72 Bellah 48.
73 Ibid., 48.
75 Bellah, 54.
76 Ibid.
77 For more on Huey Long as a trickster see Gaudet, Marcia. “The Kingfish as Trickster Hero: Huey Long in Louisiana Culture” in Louisiana Culture, 231-244.
81 Conrad, Glenn and Carl Brasseaux, Crevasse! The 1927 Flood in Acadiana, 30.
82 “Louisiana 1927” Randy Newman.
84 Jeansonne, 32-40.
86 Hair, 271.
89 Hair, 214-215.
91 Bellah, 47.
93 White, 262.
94 Ibid., 267.
95 Ibid., 267.
96 Jeansonne, 183.
97 Pals, 103.
98 Ibid., 101.
101 Bellah, 48.
103 Piazza, 31.
105 Brinkley, 2006, 611.
107 Exodus 3:8
108 There is a beer called “Jockamo”, which refers to a chant used by the Mardi Gras Indians. Furthermore, after Hurricane Katrina, a “Restoration Ale” was created and in the wake of the BP oil spill a “Save Our Shores” Pilsner was created.
112 Piazza, 97.
113 Rose, 129.
116 Ibid.
118 Piazza, 106-107.
119 Harvey Markowitz
120 Rose, 274.
122 Mitchell, 5.
124 Piazza, 98.
125 Mitchell, 4.
126 Piazza, 105
127 Bellah, 244-245
128 Rose, 271.
129 Ibid., 130-131.
130 Sothern, 234.
131 Hesiod. Theogony.
132 Piazza, 9.
133 Ibid., 35.
134 Ibid., 104.
136 Ibid., 56.
139 Ibid., xi.
140 Piazza
144 Patricia Smith wrote a poem, entitled “Superdome” describing the horror from the perspective of the building:

I did not demand they wade through the overflow from toilets, Che w their own nails bloody in place of a meal.
I didn’t feed their squalling babies chewing gum, Force them to pee out loud in gutters
or make them lick their own sweat for healing salt
I pity the women who had to sleep with their legs Smashed shut, and the elders with they rheumy eyes
Trained on my crown even after it was ripped away.
Glittering and monstrous, I was defined by a man’s hand,
My tight musculature coiled beneath plaster and glass.
I was never their church, although I disguised myself as shelter
And relentlessly tested their faith.
146 Berry, 2010.
149 “Iko Iko”
150 “Tipitina”
151 “All On a Mardi Gras Day”
152 Piazza, 35-36.
154 Rutledge, 48-56.
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
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