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Blood, Cross and Flag: The Influence of Race on Ku Klux Klan Theology in the 1920s

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the influence of race on Ku Klux Klan theology in the 1920s in order to highlight possible relations between Protestant theology and white radical nationalism. Through the analytical concept of ‘racial exegesis’—meaning a biblically based view on the supposed origin of human races—the main argument is that the Klan did not invent anything in the racial and theological domains. The Klan’s self-proclaimed mission to uphold white Protestant hegemony in America resulted not only in the identification of imagined racial and cultural threats. As important were mythical interpretations of history, according to which the white race was believed to be destined by God to thrive on American soil. The synthesis of racial ideology and Protestant theology in the Klan resulted in a self-identified vanguard of white, native-born, Protestant Americans seeking to follow Christ as ‘Criterion of Character’ by which Klansmen hoped to enhance the resurgence of American nation in accordance with the Founding Fathers’ alleged religious and racial ideals.

KEYWORDS

North America; religious politics; race; social movements; extremism

The Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, on 12 August 2017 sparked a national debate in America about white radical nationalism, racial violence, and Confederate symbols. Being the culmination of a two-year clash in the city over the removal of Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee monuments, the rally exposed that issues over the legacy of Civil War still pervade American society.¹ Among the estimated 500–600 protesters were self-proclaimed members of the alt-right, fascists, and various right-wing militias. Present were also former Ku Klux Klan Imperial Wizard David Duke and the Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Styled after previous Klan incarnations, the Loyal White Knights seek to ‘restore America to a White, Christian nation founded on God’s words’.²

Amid contemporary debates about the emergence of the alt-right, the ‘America First’ doctrine of President Donald Trump, and the aftermath of the Unite the Right rally,

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¹See Louis P. Nelson and Claudrena N. Harold (eds), *Charlottesville 2017: The Legacy of Race and Inequity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018).

²‘Home’, *The Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan*, n.d., <https://lwkkkk.com/wp/> (accessed 28 July 2020).

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there is a need to explore and examine the precursors to such phenomena and to recognize that alignments between racism, violence and Christian theology are not aberrant themes in the United States. Ideological and political mixtures of white radical nationalism and Protestant Christianity are not novel occurrences but *renewed* patterns by which actors seek to restore imagined national homogeneity allegedly shaped by race, religion and culture.³

In order to use history as a clarifying lens to shed light on how theology and notions of race can be ideologically entwined, this article examines the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s, a vital style guide for racist organization in America over the last one-hundred years. As Linda Gordon shows, much of what is being argued in America at the present day—the addition of whiteness and Christian faith as basis for national identity as well as notions of America as god-ordained territory—was also proclaimed by the Klan.⁴ That said, the aim of this article is to analyze the symbiosis of race and Christian theology in the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s. Certain emphasis is put on its ‘positive’ phase during the years 1920–1925 when the Klan became and operated as one of the largest mass movements in America before its remarkable downfall in the mid-1920s. The empirical material consists of printed Klan material, such as monographs, anthologies, magazines, and pamphlets. When analyzing the material, I apply a content analytical approach in order to systematically manage and summarize large quantities of relatively unstructured information through their historical and cultural settings.⁵ As for the magazines, I identify three as particularly essential to this study: *Imperial Night-Hawk*, *Kourier Magazine* and *The Fiery Cross*. *Imperial Night-Hawk* was a roughly ten-page weekly which existed when the Klan peaked, from 1923 to 1924, and whose editors claimed in November 1924 that almost 37,000 copies a week were printed and sent to subscribers in all 48 continental states.⁶ *Kourier Magazine* replaced *Imperial Night-Hawk* in December 1924. During the transition it became a monthly and was printed until 1936. *The Fiery Cross* was a Klan magazine that was exclusively printed and sold in the state of Indiana for its members there. Despite its regional basis, it contributes to this study since Indiana remained one of the Klan’s strongest nests—or ‘Realms’ to use Klan terminology—throughout the 1920s.⁷ In order to navigate through the empirical material I apply *racial exegesis* as an

³The literature on white Christian nationalism in America and the idea that the United States is ‘supposed’ to be a white, Protestant nation is extensive and impossible to list in its entirety. Good overviews are Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Grace Yukich and Penny Edgell, *Religion is Raced: Understanding American Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2020); Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: Norton, 2006); Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). For studies on white radical nationalist interpretations of Christianity and American nationalism, see Damon T. Berry, *Blood and Faith: Christianity in American White Nationalism* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2017); Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997). See also Katharine Gerbner, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), who convincingly argues that notions of white supremacy are rooted in seventeenth-century pro-slavery notions of what she calls ‘Protestant Supremacy’.

⁴Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York: Liveright, 2017).

⁵Chad Nelson and Robert H. Woods, ‘Content Analysis’, in Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

⁶Editorial Brevities’, *Imperial Night-Hawk*, 19 November 1924.

⁷Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK’s Appeal to Protestant America, 1915–1930* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), pp. 182–183; David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1981), pp. 162–174.

analytical concept, by which I mean a biblically based view on the supposed origin of human races. The Klan conducted such reading of the Bible in order to emphasize an imagined grandiose past which in turn was claimed to crystallize the essence of its '100 per cent Americanism' doctrine and by that a mythical account of white American history. The Klan was not, however, the inventor of such matters; indeed, its popularity was partly due to adaption of themes that circulated American society at the time.⁸ Therefore, some influential popular cultural productions and scientific publications—most notably the silent film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Madison Grant's racial historical survey *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916)—are uplifted in order to get a more thorough contextual understanding about Klan ideas on race, religion and national identity.

Concepts of significance for this study, apart from racial exegesis, are *religious nationalism*, *race* and *myth*. My analytical starting-point to religious nationalism is an a posteriori approach to the suffix 'nationalism', meaning that 'nationalism' produces 'nation' and not the other way around. This correlates to Benedict Anderson's idea of nationalism as an 'imagined political community', which produces national awareness and national identity by references to a perceived origin, shared history, and envisioned destiny.⁹ Nationalism is articulated either politically in terms of national self-determination and political administration, or culturally by seeking commonalities among its citizens such as language, clothing, music, sports, and behaviour. To religious nationalists, however, the nation as imagined is not merely a political construct or a culturally demarcated territory. To paraphrase Mattias Gardell, religious nationalists postulate that their own nation is a divine creation, culminating in that the nation is not only 'chosen' but believed to stand in a unique relationship with the Creator, from which both specific obligations and exclusive rights are derived.¹⁰

As for 'race' and 'myth' I understand the former as the notion of a specifically demarcated group of people who are believed to share certain heritage and genealogy and whose biological and/or social realities are seen as shaped by culture and/or environment.¹¹ Regarding the concept of myth, Stefan Arvidsson depicts it as a heritage narrative expressed in four inter-related ways. First, he argues that myths instil a sense of affinity with other people. Second, they motivate certain actions. Third, they legitimize specific institutions. Fourth, they portray certain behaviours, sentiments and norms as natural, eternal, and necessary.¹² The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s obviously regarded neither its racial exegetical approach nor its self-ascribed role in American society as based on myths. What is essential to my understanding of myth as an analytical concept is that it enables me to investigate dimensions of a fictitious past which the Ku Klux Klan claimed to be factual reality. Thus myths, according to Arvidsson, 'if properly interpreted, display something rational'.¹³ If ideology is

⁸Felix Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁹Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

¹⁰Mattias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 8–9. He continues, 'Nations are thus held to perform certain roles in the grand Divine design known as the history of mankind, the outcome of which frequently is revealed and included as central for the national identity. [...] A frequent collateral to this thesis is the belief that members of the Chosen Nation are themselves reflections of the Divine' (p. 9). I argue below that the Klan's perception of Klankraft reflected this national gnosis.

¹¹Cf. Marius Turda and Maria Sophia Quine, *Historicizing Race* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p. 1.

¹²Stefan Arvidsson, *Ariska idoler: Den indoeuropeiska mytologin som ideologi och vetenskap* [Aryan Idols: Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science] (Stockholm: Symposium, 2000), p. 18.

¹³Stefan Arvidsson, 'Aryan Mythology as Science and Ideology', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 67:2 (1999), p. 329.

understood as ‘thought-practices’ it thereby, as Kim Knott and Benjamin J. Lee point out, foregrounds ‘the social, material and embodied expression of ideas, beliefs and values over and above their content’.¹⁴ Then my approach to the concept of myth can be seen as aligned with Bruce Lincoln’s definition of it as ‘ideology in narrative form’.¹⁵

In order to elaborate on the racial exegesis of the Klan, I divide this study into three interrelated sections. The first offers a brief historical background to the Ku Klux Klan, its rise and fall, overarching ideas and relation to American society. The second section looks at Klan conceptions of race with specific focus on its mythical interpretations of American history, by which it declared America to be a white Protestant nation and considered Catholics and to some extent Jews as threats to this social order. The third section examines how Klan notions of race penetrated its theological perceptions and readings of the Bible. I wrap up this study with some concluding reflections.

How then did notions of race influence Ku Klux Klan theology in the 1920s?

Ku Klux Klan and 1920s America

In February 1915, David Wark Griffith’s silent epic drama film *The Birth of a Nation*, a three-hour photoplay based on Thomas Dixon’s Ku Klux Klan novels, premiered in downtown Los Angeles.¹⁶ It instantly became a public phenomenon and transformed American citizens’ relationship to film. When sound films were first launched in the mid-1920s it had sold approximately 50 million tickets, of which the vast majority went to a cinema for the first time.¹⁷ Following pro-Confederate historiography on the early Reconstruction era, the movie narrates how liberated black slaves terrorize the white population of the South and force them to submission.¹⁸ When hopelessness is portrayed as most impertinent, horseback-riding white knights enter the story and save the white population from what is depicted as megalomaniac barbarians. Symbolizing white racial survival and white American unification, the movie ends with a double marriage between the children of one Northern family and one Southern family while a figure of Christ illuminates on the screen.¹⁹ It is a glorified depiction of the first era of the Klan (1867–1872); as asserted by the film critic at the Mississippi-based daily *The Hattiesburg News* in 1916, the movie portrayed the Ku Klux Klan as ‘the South’s only hope of salvation’.²⁰

A few months after the movie’s premier, ex-minister William Joseph Simmons (1880–1945) and nineteen men marched up Stone Mountain a few miles outside of Atlanta on Thanksgiving Day where they lit a cross on fire.²¹ The group aimed to reawaken the

¹⁴Kim Knott and Benjamin J. Lee, ‘Ideological Transmission in Extremist Contexts: Towards a Framework of How Ideas Are Shared’, *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 21:1 (2020), p. 2.

¹⁵Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 147.

¹⁶Dixon’s novels, which together compose a trilogy, include *The Leopard’s Spots: A Romance of the White Man’s Burden* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1902); *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1905); *The Traitor: A Story of the Fall of the Invisible Empire* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1907).

¹⁷Harcourt, op. cit., p. 104; Melvyn Stokes, *D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation: A History of The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁸At times, I use the word ‘black’ instead of the more preferable ‘Afro-American’ to highlight the racist logic of Ku Klux Klan while simultaneously reject such views by not adapting the highly pejorative concept ‘nigger’, except for quotations.

¹⁹David Wark Griffith and Harry Aitken (Producer), and David Wark Griffith (Director), *The Birth of a Nation* (United States: Epoch Producing Co., 1915).

²⁰‘Birth of a Nation Greatest of Films’, *The Hattiesburg News*, 12 May 1916.

²¹Baker, op. cit., p. 5.

‘Invisible Empire’, an emic label for the Ku Klux Klan. The events on Stone Mountain 1915 marked the beginning of the ‘second era’ of the Klan, which stretched into the 1930s. A central aspect that was incorporated from the Reconstruction Klan and characterized its second era was the ambition to achieve pan-Protestantism, meaning the pursuit for uniting white, native-born, Protestant Americans seeking to uphold white Protestant hegemony.²² This differed from later Klan incarnations, whose overt racism would focus more on the notion of race war and racial annihilation.²³

In terms of Protestant theology, Klansmen did not differ from mainstream American society. The Ku Klux Klan was, as convincingly argued by Kelly J. Baker, ‘more evangelical than fundamentalist’ and ‘more rooted in mainline Protestantism than the stereotype recognizes’.²⁴ Another vital component was the Klan’s self-defined norm for what characterizes ‘Americanism’—a generic label for whiteness, nativism, manliness, Protestantism and patriotism—and how blacks were claimed to threaten this nationalist category. White racial survival was said to distinguish the purpose of American nation. Whereas the Ku Klux Klan maintained many doctrines from its primal incarnation, William Joseph Simmons revised some of its ambitions. From originally being a brotherhood determined to reinstate slavery, the Klan identified myriad alleged threats to white American society after the end of the First World War in 1918. Catholics, Asians, the labour movement, Communists and to some extent Jews were all accused of threatening white American civilization. As the Klan recognized more threats, Simmons envisioned new expansionist objectives for the Invisible Empire. The goal was that the Klan would operate over the entire American nation and not solely on former Confederate territory.²⁵

The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s was a product of American popular culture, an immense contemporary interest in fraternities as well as by theological and racial ideological currents which circulated American society at the beginning of the twentieth century. William Joseph Simmons, himself a member of various fraternities, was inspired to reawaken the Klan after watching *The Birth of a Nation*. He probably also read Thomas Dixon’s Ku Klux Klan novels.²⁶ He was, however, unsuccessful in recruiting members to the Invisible Empire. Five years after the constituting event on Stone Mountain, barely 2,000 members had become Klansmen, primarily in the states of Georgia and Alabama.²⁷ The sluggish start turned in June 1920 when Edward Young Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler from the Southern Publicity Association affiliated themselves with the Klan. In consultation with Simmons, Clarke and Tyler created a system where professional recruiters —‘Kleagles’—would keep a part of the fee for every person who was recruited to the Ku Klux Klan. Through Clarke and Tyler’s entrepreneurship, Kleagles could ‘sell’ the Ku

²²Ibid.; Glenn Michael Zuber, ‘Onward Christian Klansmen!': War, Religious Conflict, and the Rise of the Second Ku Klux Klan, 1912–1928’ (Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 2004). Even though native birth was required, there were Klan-allied organizations for foreign-born white Protestant Americans, such as the Royal Riders of the Red Robe.

²³Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 49–55.

²⁴Baker, op. cit., p. 9.

²⁵William Joseph Simmons, *The Klan Unmasked* (Atlanta: E. Thompson, 1923), p. 23.

²⁶Simmons’ reasons for re-establishing the Klan and contextual reasons for its creation are outside the frames of this study. For some overviews, see Gordon, op. cit., pp. 11–36; Baker, op. cit., pp. 1–8. Ku Klux Klan’s ambiguous relation to Freemasonry is brilliantly discussed in Miguel Hernandez, *The Ku Klux Klan and Freemasonry in 1920s America: Fighting Fraternities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

²⁷Gordon, op. cit., p. 13; Harcourt, op. cit., p. 3.

Klux Klan to the American public as reliant guardians of white Protestant America.²⁸ The Klan asserted that it upheld 'Protestantism and progress; not Catholicism and implicit submission to any foreign desecrating demigod'.²⁹ Another element that was introduced and contributed to what would evolve into the Klan's rapid national expansion was the appeal about which groups were claimed to threaten American society. The notion of white supremacy, substantiated by a nativist approach that also excluded Irish from being counted as 'white', remained fundamental to the Klan and it was added by anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic currents substantiated by immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe since the 1880s. It was a period when approximately 16 million people immigrated to the United States, among whom roughly 10% were of Jewish descent.³⁰ Accordingly, the Klan rose to power on a wave of patriotism, nativism, and anti-immigration that characterized white Protestant American political discourse at the time.

Identifying themselves as the cultural, spiritual and racial vanguard of America, Ku Klux Klan's self-proclaimed heroism resulted in increased membership. In a period of four years, the Invisible Empire turned into one of the country's largest mass movements with an estimated four to six million members in 1924.³¹ This means that the Klan at its peak had as many members as the American Federation of Labour, at the time one of the largest union movements in the United States.³² The 'citizens' of the Invisible Empire, which Klansmen referred themselves to as, predominately belonged to the white middle-class but was open to every white, native-born, Protestant American, regardless of social class.³³ Walter C. Wright, a Texas reverend and one of the Klan's foremost ideologues, emphasized that the core of Klan theology was belief in Christianity's essential tenets, to regard Christ as 'Criterion of Character', and to consider Romans 12 as his 'Law of Life'.³⁴ Across the country, individuals who lived up to the membership requirements sought themselves to the Invisible Empire, predominately those from Evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal churches, which in many respects constituted the Klan's recruiting ground. Kleagles were eager to recruit Protestant ministers to the Klan, highlighting the importance of clergy in building a Protestant fraternal and political movement.³⁵ As a result, by 1924, at least 30,000 pastors had become citizens of the Invisible Empire. Ku Klux Klan too had success in recruiting members from the American Lutheran Church.³⁶

While the Klan's national recruitment flourished, internal rivalry characterized its leadership. In November 1922, a group of high-ranked Klansmen convinced William Joseph

²⁸Hernandez, op. cit., pp. 92–111.

²⁹'Why Protestantism?' *The Fiery Cross*, 2 February 1923.

³⁰Harcourt, op. cit., p. 3; Baker, op. cit., p. 6. Contemporary discussions on the ambiguity of whiteness are discussed in Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

³¹Harcourt, op. cit., p. 5; Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 10.

³²MacLean, op. cit., p. 10.

³³Gordon, op. cit., pp. 88, 182–185; Baker, op. cit., p. 99; Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 178.

³⁴Walter C. Wright, *Religious and Patriotic Ideals of the Ku Klux Klan: Being a Plain, Practical and Thorough Exposition of the Principles, Purposes and Practices of the Ku Klux Klan: A Textbook on Klankraft for the Instruction of Klansmen and the Information of Non-Klansmen* (Waco: Walter C. Wright, 1926), p. 5.

³⁵Gordon, op. cit., p. 88.

³⁶MacLean, op. cit., p. 8; Shawn Lay, 'Hooded Populism: New Assessments of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s', *Reviews in American History*, 22:4 (1994), p. 670.

Simmons to step down as ‘Imperial Wizard’, a Klan term for its national head. Ostensibly concerned about his alcohol habits and general indecent behaviour, it was more of a coup than a question of well-meaning.³⁷ Hiram Wesley Evans (1881–1966), who at the time served as Grand Dragon (head of a regional Klan domain) of Dallas, succeeded Simmons as head of the national movement. Evans’ leadership marked an ideological and political turning point for the Klan. When Simmons served as Imperial Wizard, anti-Semitism was more clearly articulated in both contemporary American society and the Klan itself. In 1920, business magnate Henry Ford introduced the American public to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and published his own article series ‘The International Jew’ (1920–1922), which contributed to enhance anti-Semitism as ideological element for nationalist mobilization.³⁸ Evans on the other hand emphasized political anti-Catholicism and strived to make the Klan a political force in America. After Simmons’ enforced resignation, most Klan publications like the *Imperial Night-Hawk* and *Kourier Magazine* reflected Evans’ views. Apart from a few exceptions, official Klan documents published after 1922 stressed that the Klan was not anti-Semitic and had no fight to make on the Jews.³⁹

The Klan’s Evans-inspired anti-Catholic beliefs, which Evans regularly published in mainstream journals like the *North American Review* and *Forum*, were part of perceptual developments within American white cultural Protestantism in the 1920s. From 1922 until its rapid downfall a few years later, the Klan in general echoed the white supremacist assumptions of mainstream white America and its insistence on the inferiority of Afro-Americans. At the height of the Jim Crow and disfranchisement era, the Klan viciously maintained the sexual and social colour line, but treated Catholicism as a more immediate political and cultural threat, claiming that Catholics sought to take over the political and public school systems.⁴⁰ An example of how increasing fear for Catholicism synchronized with Klan ideology was the publication of a new edition of William Lloyd Clarke’s anti-Catholic *The Devil’s Prayer Book* in the early 1920s, advertised in many Klan papers, including *The Fiery Cross*. Clarke argues that Catholicism by nature is incompatible with white Protestant social order and that the papacy embodies impurity. Furthermore, he claims that Catholicism seeks to damage traditional family norms and that Catholics seek to replace the President and the American Constitution with the Pope and Catholic tenets.⁴¹

Conflicts within the Klan’s national leadership and the order’s own exaggeration about its actual strength and numbers contributed to its decreased influence in American society and significance to the white population. In addition, Republican Calvin Coolidge was

³⁷Harcourt, op. cit., pp. 4–5.

³⁸*The Protocols* is an anti-Semitic forgery claiming to be transcriptions of meetings between Jewish elders at the end of the nineteenth century at which they allegedly discussed their pursuit to achieve world domination by taking control over the world’s finances and media. Ford published ‘The International Jew’, which takes a similar anti-Semitic stance as the *Protocols*, in his own paper, the *Dearborn Independent*. See Henry Ford, *The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem. Being a Reprint of a Series of Articles Appearing in The Dearborn Independent* (Dearborn: Dearborn Publishing, 1920–1922).

³⁹See e.g. Wright, *Religious and Patriotic Ideals*, op. cit., p. 44; Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, *Constitution and Laws of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan* (Atlanta: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, 1922), p. 22.

⁴⁰Philip N. Racine, ‘The Ku Klux Klan, Anti-Catholicism, and Atlanta’s Board of Education, 1916–1927’, *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 57:1 (1973), pp. 63–75; Adam Laats, ‘Red Schoolhouse, Burning Cross: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and Educational Reform’, *History of Educational Quarterly*, 52:3 (2012), pp. 323–350.

⁴¹William Lloyd Clarke, *The Devil’s Prayer Book, or an Exposure of Auricular Confession as Practiced in the Roman Catholic Church: For the Use of Husbands, Fathers and Brothers* (Milan: William Lloyd Clarke, 1914).

elected President in 1924. Later that year, he signed the restrictive immigration act commonly known as the Johnson-Reed Act. Reflecting the influence of eugenics on contemporary American society, such political events contributed to settle many Americans' concerns about the large-scale and alleged degenerative influx of non-Nordic European immigrants.⁴² Consequently, while the Invisible Empire on the one hand surely influenced domestic migration policy, its own political impact ironically diminished given that its political stances from that point on were represented elsewhere in American society. Citizenships in the Invisible Empire reduced and in 1930 Ku Klux Klan members only counted to approximately 35,000.⁴³

Klan conceptions of race

At first sight, Klan conceptions of race during the 1920s were relatively simple. Through the doctrine of 'racial klanishness', Klansmen were instructed to maintain white supremacy 'first, last and all the time' and to '[k]eep Caucasian blood, society, politics and civilization PURE!'⁴⁴ The more or less spot on phrasing nonetheless, such expressions carry their own histories and meanings that ought to be contemporaneously framed. As white Southerners, William Joseph Simmons and Hiram Wesley Evans grew up listening to mythical accounts of a gallant Invisible Empire that echoed early twentieth century nativist popular culture. In their eyes, Klansmen constituted a vanguard that defended Confederate widows and orphans from 'Negro rule' supposedly imposed by the North. This foundation myth was, to follow Miguel Hernandez, unique in some respects among American movements at the time since it idealized white manhood and warned of the 'horrors' of miscegenation.⁴⁵ Thomas Dixon's novels contributed to influence such historical interpretations. In the preface of *The Klansman* (1905), Dixon's second part of his Klan trilogy, he states, 'How the young South, led by the reincarnated souls of the Clansmen of Old Scotland, went forth under this cover and against overwhelming odds [...] saved the life of a people, forms one of the most dramatic chapters in the history of the Aryan race'.⁴⁶ *Kloran*, the Klan 'Bible' written and copyrighted by Simmons, presents views on the Reconstruction Klan strikingly similar to Dixon's. It describes the Reconstruction era as an existential deprivation to the white race and likens it to darkness, where darkness too functions as euphemism for liberated black slaves, 'Darkness covered the land as the water's cover the sea. Demons were loosed from Hell's most dismal depths; the blighting hand of devastation complete was laid heavy upon the Southern people—a people pauperized, bleeding, prostrated and defenceless'.⁴⁷ The added religious symbolism in how liberated black slaves

⁴²Baker, op. cit., p. 20; Audrey Smedley and Brian D. Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2012), pp. 269–272. An example for that racial issues were represented elsewhere is found in a debate which preceded the Johnson-Reed Act during which Democrat Ellison DuRant Smith stressed that 'America perhaps [has] the largest percentage of any country in the world of the pure, unadulterated Anglo-Saxon stock; certainly the greatest of any nation in the Nordic breed'. Speech by Ellison DuRant Smith, April 9, 1924, *Congressional Record*, 68th Congress, 1st Session (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1924), vol. 65, pp. 5961–5962.

⁴³Harcourt, op. cit., p. 5; Andrew Selepak and John Sutherland, 'The Ku Klux Klan, Conservative Politics and Religion: Taking Extremism to the Political Mainstage', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 13:1 (2012), p. 80.

⁴⁴Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, *The Practice of Klanishness* (Atlanta: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, 1917), p. 5.

⁴⁵Hernandez, op. cit., p. 34.

⁴⁶Dixon, *Clansman*, op. cit., p. iv.

⁴⁷Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, *Kloran* (Atlanta: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, 1916), p. 42.

are described—‘demons loosed from Hell’s most dismal depths’—as they were the devil incarnated is contrary to the white knights of the Klan, whose arrival is described as a collective redeemer:

The anguish-laden cry of that defenseless [white] people of the Southland, was heard and answered by the gallant Knights of the Invisible Empire, and not one faltered or failed as Duty pointed the way in the cause of humanity and civilization; with a grim smile of sacred duty resting upon their manly countenance, impelled by an instinct of the race, they leaped into the saddle, borne upon the backs of their faithful steeds, baptized with a suffusion of tears, they came: they came, they saw, they conquered! From over the mysterious borderland from the Empire of the Soul the Ku Klux Klan came. They were knights errantry in the highest, noblest and gravest form personified.⁴⁸

A glorified depiction of the Reconstruction Klan was crucial to how the Invisible Empire conceived the concept of race in the 1920s. It was not, however, the sole influence. As important were mythical aspects of race aligned with contemporary eugenics. Whenever Klansmen spoke about the past they did so almost exclusively in terms of inherited ‘Nordic-ness’ from a religious nationalist standpoint, before and after the coup that brought Hiram Wesley Evans to power. William Joseph Simmons emphasized that white Americans were part of a ‘noble’ race. To not accept this view, he asserted, would be like ‘taking Hamlet out of the picture’.⁴⁹ The Klan postulated that America was a God-given territory onto which superior white men should settle in order to contribute to racial rebirth and expansion. Indeed, Simmons argued that racial rebirth on American territory implied that the United States was ‘destined by history to be the greater Nordic Europe’.⁵⁰ Hiram Wesley Evans appears to have thought in similar ways when proposing that the Klan was reincarnated due to ‘men of dependable character and sterling worth who were able to lend some kind of concrete form to the God-given idea destined to again save a white man’s civilization’.⁵¹

The Klan’s religious nationalist fixation on ‘Nordic-ness’ reflected zoologist Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), which circulated American society at the time and most likely inspired Klan notions of race. Positively reviewed throughout the 1920s, the book aims to portray a racial history of Europe. By 1937, it had sold approximately 17,000 copies in America alone.⁵² According to Grant, Europe houses three human races, the Alpine race, the Mediterranean race, and the Nordic race, of which the Nordic is superior, whose characteristics he considers to be wavy brown or blonde hair, blue, grey or biscuit eyes, light skin as well as a symmetrical nose and a sturdy and dolichocephalic physique.⁵³ He derives the origins of the Nordic race to eastern Germany, Poland and Russia and to areas stretching eastward from eastern Ukrainian grasslands to steppes south of Ural Mountains. Therefrom he claims that it spread out in every direction and established supreme historical civilizations.⁵⁴ The groups who moved west allegedly created ancient

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 44.

⁴⁹Simmons, op. cit., pp. 162–164.

⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 170–171.

⁵¹Imperial Wizard Outlines Objectives before Immense Gathering in Ohio, *Imperial Night-Hawk*, 18 July 1923.

⁵²Among Grant’s readers was Adolf Hitler who personally thanked him in a letter, stressing that ‘the book is my bible’. Unpublished autobiography of Leon F. Whitney, written in 1971, Whitney Papers, APS, pp. 204–205, quoted in Stefan Kühl, *Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 85.

⁵³Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race, Or the Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s & Sons, 1918), pp. 167–168.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 213.

Greece and the Roman Empire, both of which Grant argues declined due to miscegenation. He proposes that Nordic blood manifested itself among the Goths who, after having acquired the science, aesthetics and literature of the Roman Empire, supposedly initiated the Renaissance. This means, Grant asserts, that intellectuals like Dante, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci were racially Nordic.⁵⁵ He also argues that the vast majority of the population on British Isles belongs to the Nordic race and that it is nearly untainted in Scotland as well as in northern and eastern parts of England.⁵⁶

The Passing of the Great Race and Grant's racial theories in general had vast influence on German National Socialism, especially his emphasis on using the phrase 'Nordic' rather than the previous 'Aryan'. His popularity among German National Socialists increased when his second most important book, *The Conquest of a Continent*, appeared in 1933. Copies of this book were sent to German eugenicists Eugen Fischer and Fritz Lenz, as well as to Alfred Rosenberg, chief ideologue for the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*.⁵⁷ Yet, the Klan's reading of *The Passing of the Great Race* did not culminate in pursuits for racial annihilation. Rather, the Klan utilized elements from the book to emphasize white Protestant hegemony. Consequently, the Ku Klux Klan did not oppose Afro-Americans' right to exist. What they did oppose was different races living together under equal conditions on American soil. Walter C. Wright expressed it in a 1924-year Klan pamphlet, stating that the Invisible Empire indeed was 'a white man's organization' but did 'not [strive] to foster racial hatred or harm the negro; but to preserve the purity of the white Caucasian blood'.⁵⁸ By so doing, Wright argued that the Klan too sought to 'maintain the purity of the negro blood'.⁵⁹ To follow the Klan's racial logic, blacks should return to 'where they came from'. This vision was disguised by the Klan every now and then through statements like it merely was about solving social and political issues, which, it was said, could only be settled by a 'solidified organization of militant American men'.⁶⁰ Ku Klux Klan's notions of race can thus be understood as 'ethnopluralist'. Herein, the term only is applicable in a strict analytical sense as it was coined by the counter-intellectual and radical nationalist New Right (*Nouvelle Droite*) school of thought that emerged in France during the late 1960s.⁶¹ Ethnopluralism is characterized by monoculturalism where the world is seen as a mosaic of clearly demarcated and essentially different units where each one—e.g. white Protestant Americans and those of so-called black race—should know of and be at its rightful place and not live higgledy-piggledy in the imagined nation actors like the Ku Klux Klan seek to maintain.⁶²

The Klan's ethnopluralism, which went hand in hand with its religious nationalist approach, contributed to shape its conceptions of race and notions of white Protestant hegemony. When describing the Founding Fathers, the Klan asserted that their original intention when establishing the American nation was to make it the manifestation of

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 213–215.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 188.

⁵⁷Kühl, *Nazi Connection*, op. cit., p. 74.

⁵⁸Walter C. Wright, *The Ku Klux Klan Unmasked* (Waco: Walter C. Wright, 1924), p. 2.

⁵⁹Wright, *Religious and Patriotic Ideals*, op. cit., p. 44.

⁶⁰'White Supremacy', *The Fiery Cross*, 16 March 1923.

⁶¹Stéphane François, 'The *Nouvelle Droite* and "Tradition"', *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 8:1 (2014), pp. 87–91; Berry, *Blood and Faith*, op. cit., pp. 159–160.

⁶²Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, *Lions of the North: Sounds of the New Nordic Radical Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 44.

an idealized social order based on Protestantism and white racial homogeneity. By adhering themselves to the Founding Fathers' alleged religious and racial ideals, Klansmen asserted that their mission was to uphold the American nation as such.⁶³ Protestantism was equalized with successful civilizational progress since it allegedly fulfilled mankind's spiritual needs which Catholicism, in contrast, was claimed to be incapable of doing.⁶⁴ Such ideas were complemented with racial ideals, which Klansmen argued were ordained by God and thereby cornerstones of American nation. In the pamphlet *Ideals of the Ku Klux Klan*, published in the early 1920s, it says, 'Distinction among the races is not accidental but designed'. In order to substantiate the statement, the author writes, 'This distinction is not incidental, but is of the vastest import and indicates the wisdom of the divine mind'.⁶⁵ The Ku Klux Klan would redeem the white race whereby the American nation would rise Phoenix-like from current despair into a spiritual and holy vision that would include only white, native-born, Protestant Americans. As one Klansman wrote in *Imperial Night-Hawk*, 'From the depths of degradation and despair may spring high and holy projects'.⁶⁶

Maintaining white supremacy was not solely a premise or an ideal to the Ku Klux Klan—it was considered an existential prerequisite. In a compilation about religious, political, and social approaches of the Klan, William Joseph Simmons argued that white Americans faced extinction on their own soil.⁶⁷ The numerous increase of Japanese people living in the United States and the influx of foreign workers were considered as threats to American institutions. Metropolises like New York City allegedly exemplified the gradual demise of American society and the Klan reported that it was ready to combat foreign and 'un-American' influences.⁶⁸ As a result, while labels like 'foreign' and 'un-American' usually referred to Catholics in Klan terminology, anti-Communist conspiracy theories about the Soviet Union trying to initiate a revolution on American soil also stuck among citizens of the Invisible Empire.⁶⁹

Imaginations about an underlying force conspiring to initiate a revolution in the United States were hotbeds for anti-Semitism among Klansmen when William Joseph Simmons served as Imperial Wizard. Before the leadership coup in late 1922, Klansmen synthesized anti-Semitism with its religious nationalist stance, claiming that white Protestant Americans are the actual 'chosen people', not Jews. Simmons asserted Jews to be an underlying and powerful force in the United States who for own gain spread pro-Bolshevist propaganda and encouraged workers and blacks to initiate a revolution. Thus, he argued that American democracy is 'threatened from every side, by greedy and designing powers from above, as by a great mass of incompetent, unprincipled and undemocratic voters from below'.⁷⁰ From such notions, conspiratorial apprehensions like Jews as creators of evolutionary biology emerged (an accusation which overlooks the fact that the Christian

⁶³Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, *Ideals of the Ku Klux Klan* (Atlanta: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, n.d.), p. 4.

⁶⁴'Pride of Citizenship', *Imperial Night-Hawk*, 21 November 1923.

⁶⁵Ku Klux Klan, *Ideals*, op. cit., p. 4.

⁶⁶'Protestant Refuge', *Imperial Night-Hawk*, 9 May 1923.

⁶⁷Simmons, op. cit., p. 27.

⁶⁸'Heathenism within Our Border', *The Fiery Cross*, 2 February 1923.

⁶⁹'Klans in Western States Are Growing', *Imperial Night-Hawk*, 9 May 1923; 'America Needs the Klan', *Imperial Night-Hawk*, 9 May 1923. On anti-Communism among Klansmen and the general American public in the 1920s, see M.J. Heale, 'Citizens Versus Outsiders: Anti-Communism at State and Local Levels, 1921–1946', in Robert Justin Goldstein (ed) *Little 'Red Scares': Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921–1946* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 46–52.

⁷⁰Simmons, op. cit., pp. 146, 132–135.

cosmogonic myth has its roots in Jewish theology and that Darwin was not of Jewish descent). On these terms, Ku Klux Klan turned into a harsh critic of evolutionary biology in American society and one of the first national movements to sponsor state laws against teaching it in public schools.⁷¹ To some extent, anti-Semitism prevailed among Klansmen after Evans became Imperial Wizard, but to a much lesser degree than under Simmons' leadership. The tractate 'Principles and Purposes of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan', included in the edited volume on the first Grand Dragons annual meeting in 1923, states, 'You must either join the Klan and throw your influence on the side of decency, Christianity and law enforcement, or join the law breakers, negro preachers, Roman Catholics and Jews'.⁷² In contrast, only a few pages before that statement, Evans declared Jews as unthreatening to the Klan's ambitions to maintain white supremacy given that they were believed to be an 'unassimilable' race which 'reject[s] intermarriage' and that their 'religious and social rites and customs are inflexibly segregative'.⁷³ Such contradictions highlight the ambiguity of the Klan's racial view of Jews, indicating that the ideology of a movement does not change overnight.

Whatever the extent to which the Klan affirmed itself to anti-Semitism, the fear for Catholicism remained its primal concern throughout most of the 1920s, even though the Invisible Empire called for freedom of religion for every confession, even for Catholics.⁷⁴ But tolerance had its limits. The Catholic politicization of religion as imagined was, according to the Klan, part of its ambition to achieve world power, governed from Rome. Walter C. Wright affirmed that Catholics' 'principal aim is expressed by three letters,—MAC,—meaning "Make America Catholic", and they are bending every effort in that direction'.⁷⁵ Hiram Wesley Evans' chief indictment against Catholicism was 'that it is, fundamentally and irredeemably, in its leadership, in politics, in thought, and largely in membership, actually and actively alien, un-American and usually anti-American'.⁷⁶ In similar terms, Klan Bishop Alma White called for 'an awakening of the national conscience that has so long slept, in the face of the fact that the enemies of freedom have well-nigh accomplished their purpose in taking from us our God-given heritage'.⁷⁷ Moreover, one Klan pastor argued that the American nation 'cannot always exist part Roman Catholic and part Protestant, since the one holds allegiance to a foreign dictator whose word is law unto them'.⁷⁸ At a national Klan event—called 'Klonvokation' in Klan terminology—in 1924, a 'distinguished Klansman' stated that 'Protestantism is at least two or

⁷¹Gordon, op. cit., p. 51.

⁷²'Principles and Purposes of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan', in Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (eds) *Papers Read at the Meeting of Grand Dragons at their First Annual Meeting held at Asheville, North Carolina, July 1923* (Atlanta: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, 1923), p. 127.

⁷³Hiram Wesley Evans, 'The Attitude of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan toward the Jew', in Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (eds) *Papers Read at the Meeting of Grand Dragons at their First Annual Meeting held at Asheville, North Carolina, July 1923* (Atlanta: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, 1923), pp. 117–123. See also Edward Price Bell, *Is the Ku Klux Klan Constructive or Destructive? A Debate between Imperial Wizard Evans, Israel Zangwill and Others* (Girard: Haldeman-Julius Company, 1924), p. 14.

⁷⁴'Protestantism', *Kourier Magazine*, July 1925, p. 2; Wright, *Religious and Patriotic Ideals*, op. cit., pp. 45–46; Hiram Wesley Evans, 'The Attitude of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan Toward the Roman Catholic Hierarchy', in Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (eds) *Papers Read at the Meeting of Grand Dragons at their First Annual Meeting held at Asheville, North Carolina, July 1923* (Atlanta: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, 1923), p. 113.

⁷⁵Wright, *Religious and Patriotic Ideals*, op. cit., p. 46.

⁷⁶Hiram Wesley Evans, 'The Klan's Fight for Americanism', *The North American Review*, 223:830 (1926), p. 45.

⁷⁷Alma White, *Klansmen: Guardians of Liberty* (Zarephath: Good Citizen, 1926), p. 66.

⁷⁸'Pastor Preaches on Klan', *The Fiery Cross*, 2 February 1923.

three hundred feet higher than the darkness and the superstition and the rottenness and the tyranny of Roman Catholicism’.⁷⁹

Other Klansmen went even further in their anti-Catholicism. Instead of describing Catholicism as a national and political threat, it was depicted as the devil incarnated. In a 1923 *Fiery Cross* article, the signature ‘Hope’ refers to Book of Revelation 13:18, where the Number of the Beast (666) is mentioned and applies it numerologically to the Latin phrase *Vicarius filii Dei*, ‘Representative of the Son of God’. According to this anti-Catholic conspiracy theory, every letter represents a specific Roman numeral: D = 500, C = 100, L = 50, V/U = 5, I = 1, A/E/F/R = 0. When the letters are coded, the word ‘vicarious’ sums up to 112, ‘filii’ to 53, and ‘Dei’ to 501. When added, they sum up to 666. Based on this, Hope asks rhetorically, ‘Isn’t it the Catholic power? Can we break their chains from us?’⁸⁰ In turn, another Klansman vehemently stated in the *Kourier Magazine* that if ‘Catholics seek to control this country to the exclusion of all other forms of religious expression, they will find the Klan fighting them until the last Klansman was [*sic*] dead’.⁸¹

Klan theology and race

Protestantism contains more than religion. It is the expression in religion of the same spirit of independence, self-reliance and freedom which are the highest achievement of the Nordic race. It sprang into being automatically at the time of the great ‘upsurgence’ of strength in the Nordic peoples that opened the spurt of civilization in the fifteenth century. It has been a distinctly Nordic religion, and it has been through this religion that the Nordics have found strength to take leadership of all whites and the supremacy of the earth. Its destruction is the deepest purpose of all other peoples, as that would mean the end of Nordic rule.⁸²

The affective core of the Ku Klux Klan’s racial exegesis was fear for racial extinction. In this regard, the Klan built on the Reconstruction Klan and its urge for safeguarding the white race from alleged racial menaces. While asserting that Catholics were an immense threat to American society, the Klan also declared that Afro-Americans threatened white racial regeneration. According to William Joseph Simmons, the Invisible Empire of the Reconstruction era was founded by wise men with good knowledge about ‘the superstitions of the Negro’. Thus, a primal task for the Klan was to defend the supposed God-given white Protestant American nation from ‘the rise and assaults of an inferior [black] race, many of which within the century, had been cannibals, and some of which were still speaking the jargon of the jungles of Africa’.⁸³

With this racial logic in mind, it becomes an existential mission to preserve racial segregation. To believe anything else was seen as denying the entire history of mankind, which was considered to be determined by myriad racial conflicts. As Hiram Wesley Evans put it in the *North American Review*, ‘The whole history of the world, on its broader lines, has been one of race conflicts, wars, subjugation or extinction. This is not

⁷⁹Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, *Proceedings of the Second Imperial Klonvokation, Held in Kansas City, Missouri, Sept. 23, 24, 25, and 26, 1924* (Atlanta: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, 1924), p. 241.

⁸⁰‘Letters to the Editor’, *The Fiery Cross*, 9 February 1923.

⁸¹‘Protestantism’, *Kourier Magazine*, July 1925.

⁸²Evans, ‘Americanism’, op. cit., p. 54.

⁸³Simmons, op. cit., p. 20.

pretty, and certainly disagrees with the maudlin theories of cosmopolitanism, but it is the truth. The world has been so made that each race must fight for its life, must conquer, accept slavery or die'.⁸⁴ These imagined racial conflicts—which ought to be interpreted in ethnopluralist terms and not as a declaration of 'race war'—were seen by Klansmen as a mean to uphold divine creation, implying that they considered God to be on their side. In one Klan hymn found in *Kloran*, the lyrics goes, 'To Thee, oh God I call to thee—/ True to my oath, oh, help me be! / I've pledged my love, my blood, my all; / Oh, give me grace that I not fall'.⁸⁵

The racial exegesis of the Ku Klux Klan was a product of its time. It was common in post-Civil War American society to concatenate racism, Social Darwinism, and biblical exegesis into an ideological system which Paul Harvey calls 'mytho-scientific racism'.⁸⁶ Mixing biblical and scientific patterns enabled enquiries in order to scientifically support the claim of black racial inferiority. In addition, racial interpretations of Scripture—e.g. the cosmogonic story in the first chapter of Genesis—allegedly sustained this science. One of many publications on racial theology that most likely influenced becoming Klansmen on such matters was *Anthropology of the People*, published pseudonymously in 1891 under the name Caucasian. In the book, Caucasian compares three theories about the origins of mankind and argues for which is believed to be most in accordance with Scripture. The theories are *monogenesis* (every race derives from Adam and Eve), *polygenesis* (only the white race derives from Adam and Eve), and *evolutionary biology*. The last theory is rejected by Caucasian as it supposedly is 'emphatically the theory of infidels, skeptics and atheists—the pet philosophy of all the fools who say in their hearts, there is no God'.⁸⁷ Caucasian also rejects the monogenetic theory on the basis that it, if true, would have degenerated mankind due to miscegenation and thus turned Creation into failure. The theory is portrayed as humiliating God and incompatible with mankind's 'natural instincts' to hold on to one's own race. Caucasian considers it 'so absurd and preposterous, that it never could have been entertained by intelligent minds'.⁸⁸ Based on these amplifications, Caucasian argues for the polygenetic theory as most compatible with the Bible. This implicates that non-whites are not descendants of Adam but inferior beings created by God *before* Adam and Eve. Such racial exegetical approach to the Bible purportedly explains how it is that Cain after having slayed his brother Abel gets to meet another people in the land of Nod. Previously unmentioned in Scripture, the people of Nod according to this view are considered to be an inferior race excluded from Adamic genealogy. Caucasian asserts that such an approach is biblically plausible given the unthinkable that God would degrade and degenerate his most superior part in Creation in favour of miscegenated offspring.⁸⁹

⁸⁴Evans, 'Americanism', op. cit., p. 53. See also Simmons, op. cit., pp. 279–281.

⁸⁵Ku Klux Klan, *Kloran*, op. cit., p. 36. For an overview on how the Klan incorporated religion in songs between the 1920s and 2014, see Juan O. Sánchez, *Religion and the Ku Klux Klan: Biblical Appropriation in Their Literature and Songs* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2016).

⁸⁶Paul Harvey, 'A Servant of Servants Shall He Be': The Construction of Race in American Religious Mythologies', in Craig R. Prentiss (ed) *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), pp. 21–22.

⁸⁷W.H. Caucasian, *Anthropology for the People: A Refutation of the Theory of the Adamic Origin of All Races* (Richmond: Everett Waddey, 1891), p. 39.

⁸⁸Ibid., pp. 17–26.

⁸⁹Ibid., pp. 27–30.

Ku Klux Klan appears to have reasoned in similar polygenetic terms. It disfavoured evolutionary biology—here not connected with anti-Semitism as earlier—and uplifted the need to maintain white supremacy, as stated in its ‘kreed’ and elsewhere.⁹⁰ Walter C. Wright claimed that evolutionary biology is nothing but speculations and ‘bogs of unbelief’. Belief in evolution, he stressed, culminates in agnosticism, atheism and disbelief. Nevertheless, he asserted that Klansmen ‘stand for, believe in, and seek to promote every effort to advance true science, develop the intellect, discover truth and expose error’, that they ‘are interested in research, development, discovery and invention’ and ‘ready to accept all proven facts’. They were, however, ‘neither willing nor ready to accept unproven and unsupported “theories” that are nothing more or less than wild, visionary guess-work of so-called scientists, based solely on “suppositions”’.⁹¹ Apart from rejecting evolutionary biology, the Klan’s polygenetic racial exegesis resulted in a point of view according to which the United States is ascribed a God-given mission to regenerate the white race. As such, the Ku Klux Klan claimed itself to represent ‘a holy crusade’ and to be ‘another form of God’.⁹² Believed to be ‘cemented with the morale of Protestant Christianity’, Hiram Wesley Evans argued that the Klan’s ‘crusade’ for social and cultural maintenance stretches back to the Apostle Paul and his epistle to the Romans. In the epistle, Evans claims that Paul carries the ‘ideal of Klannishness’ to its highest levels by setting up a standard of character and of conduct by which ‘every true Klansman must measure his life’.⁹³

Paul’s epistle to the Romans was crucial to the Klan, theologically and ideologically. Emphasis was put on its twelfth chapter, dealing with topics such as offering one’s body as a living sacrifice to God, humble service in the body of Christ, and love in action. Romans 12 was described as ‘a compendium of the Bible’ and during Klonvokations, it was Romans 12 that the Klan chaplain, or ‘Kludd’, placed on the sacred altar.⁹⁴ Walter C. Wright elaborated extensively on the chapter, stressing that it ‘contains more of the fundamental teachings of Christ, and more of the practical rules for Christian living than any other chapter in the whole Bible’. Thus, he proclaimed that ‘Klansmen have adopted it as their Law of Life because it presents so many of the sacred principles which the Klan seeks to inculcate’.⁹⁵

Racial exegesis, as articulated by the Ku Klux Klan, was not a static concept. Rather, it ought to be seen as a generic category from which myriad biblical viewpoints on the origin of human races derived. In my reading of Klan material, I have identified three different orientations. The first is based on the genealogical story in Genesis 9, which tells about Noah and his three sons Shem, Ham and Japheth, from whom ‘the whole earth overspread’, to follow the biblical narrative. After Ham told his two brothers that he had seen their father drunk and naked, Noah finds out and curses Canaan, Ham’s son, to be ‘a servant of servants unto his brethren’. Out of this biblical story, a racial exegesis derives proclaiming that Ham is the originator of the black race, Shem of the Semitic race, and Japheth of the Aryan race. This racial reading of the ninth chapter of Genesis was part of legitimizing slavery in the United States since it was argued that God had

⁹⁰ ‘White Supremacy’, *The Fiery Cross*, 16 March 1923; Ku Klux Klan, *Ideals*, op. cit., pp. 4–6; Ku Klux Klan, *Constitution and Laws*, op. cit., p. 55; Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, *Klansman’s Manual* (Atlanta: Buckhead, 1924), pp. 17–18.

⁹¹ Wright, *Religious and Patriotic Ideals*, op. cit., p. 51.

⁹² Ku Klux Klan, *Second Imperial Klonvokation*, op. cit., p. 233; ‘God in the Klan’, *Kourier Magazine*, February 1925.

⁹³ Evans, ‘Attitude Toward the Jew’, op. cit., pp. 122–123.

⁹⁴ Ku Klux Klan, *Second Imperial Klonvokation*, op. cit., p. 157; Ku Klux Klan, *Kloran*, op. cit., p. 11.

⁹⁵ Wright, *Religious and Patriotic Ideals*, op. cit., pp. 28–31.

predestined blacks to slavery or at least to be subordinated those of white race.⁹⁶ Traces of this racial exegesis is found in the official 'kreed' of the Klan, which states, 'We avow the distinction between the races of mankind as same has been decreed by the Creator, and we shall ever be true in the faithful maintenance of white supremacy and will strenuously oppose any compromise thereof in any and all things'.⁹⁷

The second orientation is based on the notion that the Anglo-Saxon race embodies the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Known as British-Israelism, dating back to early nineteenth-century England, this view is rooted in the biblical story about Jacob's twelve sons, each of whom were progenitors of an own tribe which together made up the Israelites.⁹⁸ After the demise of King Solomon in 930 BC, civil war erupted in the Israelite nation, resulting in its division into two kingdoms: the northern Kingdom of Israel composed of ten tribes, and the southern Kingdom of Judea comprised of the other two. Two hundred years after Solomon's decease, the Assyrian Empire invaded the northern Kingdom and imprisoned its population, whose subsequent history has remained a historical mystery. Most probably, they assimilated into their new environment and gradually lost their tribal characteristics.⁹⁹ Representatives for the emerging British-Israelist movement disagreed with the assimilation theory. Instead, they insisted that the tribes did not return to Israel after the exile; rather, they were claimed to have migrated from Assyria through nowadays Turkey, Greece, the southern regions of former Soviet Union and Western Europe. Eventually, they ended up on the British Isles and supposedly became ancestors of the British races.¹⁰⁰ Only a few Klansmen confessed to a racial exegesis inspired by British-Israelism.¹⁰¹ Nonetheless, given the Klan's significance to white radical nationalist organization in America, it is possible to inscribe the Invisible Empire of the 1920s into a historical continuity of British-Israelism from nineteenth-century England to the contemporary Christian Identity movement. A loose coalition of believers and churches, Christian Identity racial theological teachings regard Jews as the cosmological archenemy of Aryan man and Aryans as descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.¹⁰² Some twenty-first century variants of the Klan, like the White Camelia Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, proclaim themselves adherents of Christian Identity.¹⁰³

The third orientation was articulated most frequent by Klansmen. Noticeably coloured by Madinson Grant's racial history of Europe, it upholds the notion of human races' distribution around the globe. It also adds a religious nationalist dimension, considering God to have chosen superior British men of Nordic race to cross the Atlantic and through divine guidance establish a nation characterized by racial purity and trust in God. Americans of Nordic race were claimed to be the new 'chosen people' and God's new

⁹⁶Harvey, op. cit., pp. 13–27; Gerbner, op. cit.

⁹⁷Ku Klux Klan, *Kloran*, op. cit., p. 2.

⁹⁸Barkun, op. cit., pp. 5–15.

⁹⁹Douglas E. Cowan, 'Theologizing Race: The Construction of "Christian Identity"', in Craig R. Prentiss (ed) *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), pp. 113–114.

¹⁰⁰Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), p. 235; Cowan, op. cit., pp. 113–114.

¹⁰¹See, e.g., 'A Klan Meditation', *Kourier Magazine*, January 1927.

¹⁰²Goodrick-Clarke, op. cit., pp. 234–235; Cowan, op. cit. A selection of contemporary Christian Identity forums are *The Saxon Messenger*, *Covenant Messenger*, and *The New Ensign*.

¹⁰³Christian Identity', *White Camelia Knights of the Ku Klux Klan*, n.d., <http://www.wckkkk.org/identity.html> (accessed 31 July 2020).

commandments were regarded to proclaim that his people would regenerate the defiled Nordic race.¹⁰⁴ Such mythical and racial interpretations of American history pervaded American society at the time. By reminiscing the Civil War, a racial myth of a people chosen by God to carry out a mission of salvation started to take shape among white Protestant Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century. Gradually, this myth developed into a sacrosanct glorification of the United States as a promised land for those of Nordic race.¹⁰⁵ The Ku Klux Klan undoubtedly reflected such mythical historical accounts. Hiram Wesley Evans asserted that ‘the hand of God was in the creation of the American stock and nation’.¹⁰⁶ It also became a divine mission to counteract miscegenation. The purpose was to preserve what the Ku Klux Klan considered to be divine order. For instance, the Deluge was seen as biblical evidence for miscegenation as opposing the Words of God and as such contradicting God’s plan for mankind.¹⁰⁷ According to this form of racial exegesis, every Klansman should act as an ideal patriotic Christian. It included, among other things, that the Bible and the American flag should be clearly displayed in the home, and Klansmen and their families were expected to regularly attend mass and Sunday school.¹⁰⁸ This view was clearly articulated by Evans in 1925 when he stated, ‘As the star of Bethlehem guided the wise men to Christ, so it is that the Klan is expected more and more to guide men to the right life under Christ’s banner’.¹⁰⁹

Regardless form of racial exegesis, the general goal for the Ku Klux Klan was to maintain the Founding Fathers’ religious and racial ideals as imagined in order to counteract the alleged defilement of American society. To do so, the Klan formulated six premises. First, the Republic was established by white men; second, it was established for white men; third, it should never fall into the hands of an ‘inferior’ race; fourth, blacks must be kept outside of politics; fifth, blacks ought to comprehend that whites are the ones who rule in America; sixth, purity of the white blood must be maintained.¹¹⁰ The sixth premise appeared to be especially important to the Klan’s racial exegesis, both under the Simmons and Evans eras. Two important Klan documents from each of these eras—*Constitution and Laws of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan* (1922) and *Klansman’s Manual* (1924)—establish that one of the fundamentals of the Klan was ‘to maintain forever the God-given supremacy of the white race’.¹¹¹

Apart from its biblically based view on the origin of human races, the racial exegesis of the Ku Klux Klan revolved around the perception of Americans as white, native-born patriots from a pan-Protestant point of view. It was a self-proclaimed norm of the Klan, which its members claimed to embody. Ku Klux Klan consequently considered itself to be the archetype of idealized Americanism. By aiming to preserve white racial purity, it ascribed itself almost prophetic qualities. A core concept in this context is Klankraft. At the first annual Grand Dragon meeting in Asheville, North Carolina, in July 1923, Klankraft was defined as ‘the motive power embodying the divine and cardinal principles necessary for the resurrection of that real, genuine Americanism of which our forefathers undoubtedly had the

¹⁰⁴Wright, *Religious and Patriotic Ideals*, op. cit.; Ku Klux Klan, *Second Imperial Klunkvation*, op. cit., pp. 233–241.

¹⁰⁵Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 23–25.

¹⁰⁶Evans, ‘Americanism’, op. cit., p. 51.

¹⁰⁷Wright, *Religious and Patriotic Ideals*, op. cit., pp. 43–44.

¹⁰⁸‘Fortitude’, *Imperial Night-Hawk*, 9 May 1923; ‘Klansman, To Church!’ *Imperial Night-Hawk*, 23 May 1923.

¹⁰⁹‘A Message from the Imperial Wizard’, *Kourier Magazine*, February 1925.

¹¹⁰Ku Klux Klan, *Ideals*, op. cit., p. 5.

¹¹¹Ku Klux Klan, *Constitution and Laws*, op. cit., p. 5; Ku Klux Klan, *Klansman’s Manual*, op. cit., pp. 17–18. My emphasis.

vision when they drafted the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States'.¹¹² Through Klankraft, the Ku Klux Klan was able to embrace a racial genealogy, which supposedly stretched back to the Founding Fathers. In order to concretize the concept, it was divided into five sub-categories: the educational, the political, the vocational, the practical, and the spiritual. As for the educational, the Klan considered it as essential to every citizen of the Invisible Empire in their aptitude to pursue their self-proclaimed reenacting mission while the political category emphasized the 'love and reverence which every true native born American has for his flag, his government and his home'. The vocational category was paramount to the Klan's strife for national self-preservation, and the practical category aimed to highlight the necessity to maintain the Klan's organizational structure.¹¹³

The most important aspect of Klankraft was the spiritual. It was through spirituality Klansmen united in religious faith whereby their actions were claimed to maintain the relationship between God and the Nordic race. Hiram Wesley Evans declared that 'spiritual independence' sprang up 'just as the Nordic races began to assert themselves in their great blossoming of the last four centuries, and found its chief expression in Protestantism' which is 'the soul of the Klan'.¹¹⁴ Accordingly, Klankraft uplifted 'the art of inculcating into the heart and soul of man a reverence for Deity, for our country, our homes, and each other through inspiration and education'.¹¹⁵ It was through the concept of Klankraft terms like salvation, gospel and crusade were placed within the Klan's religious nationalist project. It was about preaching 'the gospel of patriotism', pursuing 'the crusade for Americanism' and 'assist[ing] the authorities in creating love and respect in the hearts of all men for our starry banner and the great government which it represents'.¹¹⁶ In other words, Klankraft contributed to strengthen Klansmen's ambitions to mobilize a vanguard of white, native-born, Protestant Americans, to make them follow Christ as the Klan's 'Criterion of Character' and thereby to enhance the resurgence of American nation in accordance with the Founding Fathers' alleged religious and racial ideals. Such a religious nationalist and racial exegetical positioning was reflected in the burning cross, a defining symbol for the Klan ever since. As one Klan pastor aptly put it:

In the Wilderness Moses effected [*sic*] a cross and it meant life to stricken Israel. On Calvary's mount was another cross. There upon that cross Christ, very God, and very man, was crucified for the sins of the world and brought salvation to mankind. [...] And today we see another cross which champions 'The White Wave'. May we be led by the spirit of this cross and might we have our robes washed white in the blood of the lamb, not only Klansmen but all the people the world over would then be true soldiers of the cross with Christ as the great captain and leader.¹¹⁷

Concluding reflections

At its peak in the mid-1920s, the Ku Klux Klan was one of the largest mass movements in the United States with an estimated membership of between four to six million. The

¹¹²Grand Dragon of the Realm of Oklahoma, 'The Definition of Klankraft and How to Disseminate It', in Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (eds) *Papers Read at the Meeting of Grand Dragons at their First Annual Meeting held at Asheville, North Carolina, July 1923* (Atlanta: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, 1923), p. 45.

¹¹³Oklahoma, op. cit., pp. 47–51.

¹¹⁴Evans, 'Americanism', op. cit., p. 36.

¹¹⁵Oklahoma, op. cit., p. 46.

¹¹⁶Oklahoma, op. cit., p. 49; Evans, 'Americanism', op. cit., p. 63.

¹¹⁷'Pastor Explains Klan', *The Fiery Cross*, 29 December 1922.

Invisible Empire was a product of an affective urge to recreate a mythical past based on religious and racial homogeneity, and Klansmen therefore sought to embody a self-proclaimed ideal for what they claimed signified true Americanism. This ideal included notions of patriotism, nativism, white supremacism, and Protestant theology. Its Protestantism, in turn, was characterized as pan-Protestantism, meaning a project to unite every branch of Protestantism on American territory—e.g. Lutherans, Methodists and Baptists—provided that adherents were considered part of the white Nordic race and born on American soil. The Klan itself did not invent its notions of race. Rather, the Invisible Empire was a mere reflection of contemporary American society and ideas which were prominent at the time. What the Klan did was therefore to reconsider contemporary issues related to race, Protestant theology, and notions of what it meant to be ‘American’. Inspired by prominent race ideologues and racial exegetes at the time and their works, the Ku Klux Klan applied a religious nationalist standpoint according to which the white race as imagined had God-given right to thrive on American soil. Through this interpretation, the Klan too constructed and articulated a racial exegetical approach through which its members envisioned white racial regeneration. Being a generic concept as used in this article, the Klan adapted three different forms of racial exegesis in order to combine notions of race and interpretations of the Bible: Table of Nations, the Ten Lost Tribes, and a more general religious nationalism. Overall, a polygenetic interpretation of the Bible most clearly characterized the racial exegesis as articulated by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. The synthesis of racial ideology and Protestant theology in the Klan resulted in a self-identified vanguard of white, native-born, Protestant Americans seeking to follow Christ as ‘Criterion of Character’ by which Klansmen hoped to enhance the resurgence of American nation in accordance with the Founding Fathers’ alleged religious and racial ideals.

Even though many Americans opposed the Klan, it did not diverge much from main-line society. A core reason to the Klan’s rapid rise in the early 1920s was that it uplifted many Americans’ concerns about immigration, emphasized pride in national identity, and identified elements which were claimed to distinguish ‘Americanism’. By highlighting nativism and race added with religion, the Klan’s core argument was that one cannot ‘become’ American; either one ‘is’ or ‘is not’ American. In that sense, when looking at more current events around the globe where ‘non-whites’ are supposed to be inherently incapable of becoming ‘American’, ‘British’, ‘German’, ‘Norwegian’ or ‘Swedish’, there is a need to study historical actors whose arguments were remarkably similar to those uttered at the present day. Only by revisiting their historical predecessors, the contemporary white radical nationalist scene that currently is on the rise can be understood.

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