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The Clergy and the Myth of the American West

FERENC M. SZASZ

The myth of the American West has become the nation's greatest cultural creation. From nineteenth-century German writer Karl May to the present-day Solidarity movement in Poland, images drawn from the frontier West have inspired people throughout the globe. Although scholars have spent years trying to separate fact from fiction in this tale, most have concluded that it is impossible. "The myth," historian Robert Athearn has noted, "is an essential part of the western past."¹

The saga of the American West has provided the United States with the core of its national imagery. The West has spawned both heroes of popular culture, such as Tom Mix, Roy Rogers, and John Wayne, as well as a distinguished body of historical, literary, and film scholarship.² At the time of his death in 1988 Louis L'Amour ranked as one of the four best-selling novelists in the world. Each of L'Amour's over 100 books is still in print; every novel has sold over a million copies. Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, A.B. Guthrie, Jr.'s *The Big Sky* and *The Way West*, Eugene Manlove Rhodes's *Paso Por Aqui*, Walter Van Tilberg Clark's *The Ox Bow Incident*, Jack Schaefer's *Shane*, N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, and Ivan Doig's *This House of Sky* have taken their places in the canon of American literature. As the meeting ground between "savagery" and "civilization," the American frontier has ever inflamed the imagination.³

Historians, novelists, and filmmakers have created or chronicled a vast array of western characters: the trapper, the outlaw, the scout, the outlaw, the

1. Robert Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth Century America* (Lawrence, Kans., 1986), p. 176; T. K. Whipple, *Study Out the Land* (Berkeley, 1942), also argues that "frontier" and "West" are synonymous.
2. See, for example, Richard W. Etulain, "Changing Images: The Cowboy in Western Films," *Colorado Heritage* 1 (1981): 37-55; William W. Savage, Jr., *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture* (Norman, Okla., 1979); Kent Ladd Steckmesser, *Western Outlaws: The "Good Badman" in Fact, Film, and Folklore* (Claremont, Calif., 1985); John Tuska, *The Filming of the West* (Garden City, N.Y., 1976); Jenni Calder, *There Must Be A Lone Ranger: The American West in Film and Reality* (New York, 1974); Wallace Stegner, "History, Myth, and the Western Writer," in *Great Stories of the West*, ed. J. Golden Taylor, vol. 1 (New York, 1971) pp. xiii-xxv; and William T. Pilkington, ed., *Critical Essays on the Great Western American Novel* (Boston, 1980).
3. Louis L'Amour, *Last of the Breed* (New York, 1986), p. 368; Lewis O. Saum, "Billington's Frontier and the Realm of Ideas," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 73 (1982): 123.

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cowboy, the trooper, the rancher, the shepherd, the buffalo soldier, the pioneer wife, the stagecoach driver, the "Indian," the prospector, the pony express rider, the madame with a heart of gold, the railroad worker, the speculator, the schoolmarm, the sod buster, the Mormon pioneer, and so on. The West has provided America with a national stage, where all the characters have been assigned heroic roles.⁴ Except one. There is one group that figured quite prominently in the reality of the American West which the mythology has totally ignored. This group is the American clergy, and this essay will attempt to explain why.⁵

Such a venture, of course, must be somewhat speculative. Archivists do not usually seek out negative evidence for their files. Thus, with C. C. Goen's study of the churches and the Civil War as a model, I offer this essay not as a proposition to be "proven" but a "thesis to be examined."⁶

First, the reality. Clerics from all the major religious groups played central roles in the development of the American West from the 1830s to the end of the century. Methodist Jason Lee teamed with Presbyterians Henry and Eliza Spalding and Dr. Marcus and Narcissa Whitman to help open the Pacific Northwest to Yankee settlement. The ensuing "Oregon fever" arose, in large measure, from their mission forays. During the 1860s, Unitarian Thomas Starr King used his forensic skills both to advocate a general spirituality as well as to encourage Californians to remain loyal to the Union. After the Civil War Episcopal bishop Daniel Sylvester Tuttle built schools, hospitals, and churches throughout the northern intermountain West for twenty years. His contemporary, Ethelbert Talbot, did the same in Wyoming and Idaho for over a decade. Shortly after the Presbyterian Sheldon Jackson moved to Alaska in 1883 he introduced reindeer to help feed the native population. An Alaskan college still bears his name.⁷

4. The literature is enormous, but the best studies are: Bruce A. Rosenberg, *The Code of The West* (Bloomington, 1982); Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialism, 1800-1890* (New York, 1985); Lee Clark Mitchell, *Witness to a Vanishing America: The Nineteenth-Century Response* (Princeton, 1981); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn., 1973); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950); Ray Allen Billington, *Land of Savagery/Land of Promise: The European Image of the American Frontier in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1981); Stephen Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid: Visions of the Outlaw in America, 1881-1981* (Albuquerque, 1982).
5. I will expand the concept of "clergy" to include nonordained Sunday school workers and missionaries, many of whom were women.
6. C. C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the American Civil War* (Macon, Ga., 1985).
7. For King, see Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915* (Santa Barbara, Calif., 1981), pp. 97-105, and Sandra Sizer Frankiel, *California's Spiritual Frontiers: Religious Alternatives in Anglo-Protestantism, 1850-1910* (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 18-30. For the Pacific Coast missionaries, the best studies are: Clifford M. Drury, *Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and the Opening of Old Oregon* (Seattle, 1986); Robert J. Loewen-

On the Roman Catholic side Jesuit Pierre-Jean de Smet not only founded missions among the Flatheads, the Kalispels, and Coeur d'Alenes, he also served as a peacemaker for the Northern Plains. The most celebrated "Blackrobe," de Smet mediated at the Great Council near Fort Laramie (1851), the Mormon War (1857-1859), the Yakima Indian War (1858-1859), and the Bighorn Valley gathering (1868). During the latter discussions, he safely visited the camp of Sitting Bull, who had sworn to take the life of the first white man who showed himself. De Smet's colleague, Joseph Maria Cataldo, later directed the entire Jesuit mission field of the Pacific Northwest for years, founded Gonzaga in Spokane, and recruited eighteen European Jesuits for mission work with the Indians. In the Spanish Southwest, Bishops Jean Baptiste Lamy and Joseph Salpointe helped shape an ethnic Catholicism that still reflects distinct regional overtones.⁸

Virtually every section of the American West boasted a clerical figure who helped mold the contours of the region. For Montana and Idaho, the names might be Jesuit Anthony Ravalli, Presbyterian Sue McBeth, and Methodist William Wesley Van Orsdel; for Colorado, Methodist "Father" James Dyer and Denver Rabbi William S. Friedman; for Wyoming, Presbyterian Sunday school founder W. H. Schureman and Congregationalist W. B. D. Gray; for California, Unitarian Starr King; for West Texas, Baptist L. R. Millican. The list could easily be extended.⁹

Local communities held these clergymen in high esteem. When Starr King died the California state legislature adjourned for three days; both Bret Harte and John Greenleaf Whittier later wrote poems in his honor. Montana's Van Orsdel was affectionately known as "Brother Van," while Tuttle became known as "Bishop Dan." Ethelbert Talbot was termed "our bishop" and

berg, *Equality on the Oregon Frontier: Jason Lee and the Methodist Mission, 1834-43* (Seattle, 1976), and *Idaho Yesterdays* 31 (Spring/Summer, 1987), the entire issue of which is devoted to the story of religion in the Pacific Northwest. An overview may be found in Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Protestant Clergy in the Great Plains and Mountain West, 1865-1915* (Albuquerque, 1988). See also the essays in Szasz, ed., *Religion in the West* (Manhattan, Kans., 1984); and Carl Guarneri and David Alvarez, eds., *Religion and Society in the American West* (New York, 1987).

8. A. M. Jung, *Jesuit Missions Among the American Tribes of the Rocky Mountain Indians* (Spokane, 1925); Robert C. Carraker, "Joseph M. Cataldo: Courier of Catholicism to the Nez Percés," in *Churchmen and Western Indians*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II and Floyd A. O'Neil (Norman, Okla., 1988), pp. 109-139; Gerald McKeivitt, "The Jump that Saved the Rocky Mountain Mission: Jesuit Recruitment and the Pacific Northwest," *Pacific Historical Review* 55 (1986): 427-453; William N. Bischoff, *The Jesuits in Old Oregon* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1945); Wilfred P. Schoenberg, *A History of the Catholic Church in the Pacific Northwest, 1743-1983* (Washington, D.C., 1987); Robert Ignatius Burns, *Jesuits and the Indian Wars of the North-West* (New Haven, 1966); Paul Horgan, *Lamy of Santa Fe, His Life and Times* (New York, 1975).
9. See Szasz, *Protestant Clergy*, and Schoenberg, *History of the Catholic Church*, both passim; see also Robert E. Levinson, "American Jews in the West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 5 (1974): 285-294, and Harriet and Fred Rochlin, *Pioneer Jews: A New Life in the Far West* (Boston, 1984).

probably provided Owen Wister with his model for “the bishop” in *The Virginian*. Cataldo, who lived to be ninety-one, was revered by Spokane citizens of all faiths. The dome of the Colorado Capitol contains a stained-glass rendition of Father Dyer, and California put up statues to both Franciscan Junipero Serra and Starr King in the rotunda of the national capitol. Washington State did the same for Marcus Whitman. As the *El Paso Herald Post* observed on the death of Baptist L. R. Millican, “The man of God of the type of Brother Millican was as much a part of the west as the greasewood, the rancher, and the steer.”¹⁰

The western clergy, however, has found it difficult to move from historical admiration into the realm of myth. In fact, the preceding list of names probably sparked only regional or denominational recognition. Residents of the Pacific Northwest might recall Brother Van, the Whitmans, de Smet, and Cataldo but are probably vague on Lamy, Jackson, or Dyer. Episcopalians might acknowledge Tuttle and Talbot but would probably puzzle over Schureman and Ravalli. And virtually no one, even in his west Texas homeland, has heard of Southern Baptist L. R. Millican.

Yet who has *not* heard of Kit Carson, Buffalo Bill, Bat Masterson, Sitting Bull, Rain-in-the-Face, Geronimo, Annie Oakley, Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane, Joaquin Murieta, Wyatt Earp, George A. Custer, Davy Crockett, or Billy the Kid?

By any “objective” criteria these categories of fame should be reversed. De Smet’s peace-keeping saved hundreds of both Native American and white lives. His bravery should have been turned into an instant legend. Why were there no ballads composed about Sheldon Jackson and his reindeer or Bishop Tuttle and his schools? Surely, founding twenty-one missions, churches, schools, or hospitals is equal to shooting twenty-one people, as Billy the Kid allegedly did. But myth does not work “objectively,” and one must search in other realms.

Historians are well aware of the fact that most American history textbooks ignore religious themes. The omission, however, can easily be corrected by printing a new edition. To be excluded from a nation’s mythology, however, is far more complex, for one cannot create a myth to order. The mythology of the American West arose from the specific needs and circumstances of the American people. These circumstances, moreover, suggest six reasons why the clergy have been excluded from it.

First is the nature of the frontier that produced the myth. In retrospect, it is clear that America experienced several frontiers or “wests”: eastern colonial, Spanish borderlands, trans-Appalachian, trans-Mississippi, and, now, the twentieth century. But the mythological frontier is more specific. Although there are some exceptions, it is largely grounded in the late nineteenth

10. *El Paso Herald Post*, 19 April 1938.

century. The chief locus for the myth of the West is post-Civil War in time and the Great Plains or the Rocky Mountains in location. In this mythological time zone it is always the Gilded Age, and Rutherford B. Hayes is the eternal president.

Thus clerics who lived on the early frontiers—Jonathan Edwards, John and David Brainard, Roger Williams, Junipero Serra, Francisco Palou, Eusebio Kino, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman, Jason Lee, Samuel Parker, and others—have all been “demoted” at the onset. Their reputations will never actually “disappear,” but they will always be limited to their specific region. Because of their location in both space and time, these clergy cannot provide materials for the greater, national epoch.

Second, the first generation of historians and writers to analyze the “passing of the frontier” were seldom interested in religious issues. Historian Ray Allen Billington has shown that the most famous of them all, Frederick Jackson Turner, did not share religious concerns. Indeed, the themes of religion and the role of clergy both belonged to the world of eastern “cultural baggage,” and that did not fit easily into Turner’s famous “frontier thesis,” however interpreted. During the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, most historians of the West gave the clerics wide berth. Colin B. Goodykoontz and L. B. Palladino, S. J., were two rare examples from that generation to chronicle the role of the frontier clergy.¹¹

Many of these Gilded Age clergy also did missionary work with the Indians. After World War I, however, the missionary to the Indians emerged as the most controversial of all figures involved in the expansion of frontier Christianity. In the early twentieth century the first generation of western historians wrestled with the difficult task of “facing the future in Indian missions” or “rethinking missions.” Neither they nor their successors shared the same goals as their Gilded Age counterparts. Missionary history has still proven difficult to write. As a result, when studies of the frontier clerics were done, they were usually written in-house: written by denominational writers for denominational audiences and published by denominational presses. They seldom reached out to broader issues.¹²

11. Ray Allen Billington, *Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher* (New York, 1973); Colin B. Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier, with Particular Reference to the American Home Mission Society* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1939); L. B. Palladino, *Indian and White in the Northwest: A History of Catholicity in Montana, 1831 to 1891* (Lancaster, Pa., 1922).
12. Balanced studies of missions to the Indians include: Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *Salvation and the Savage* (New York, 1972) and Henry Warner Bowden, *American Indians and Christian Missions* (Chicago, 1981). The most representative accounts of western clerics, however, are monographs that discuss a single denomination within a state framework. Typical examples are: Allan duPont Breck, *The Episcopal Church in Colorado, 1860–1963* (Denver, 1963); Motier A. Bullock, *Congregational Nebraska* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1905); Lewis A. Myers, *A History of New Mexico Baptists* (Albuquerque, 1965); Thomas J. Noel, *Colorado Catholicism* (Denver, 1990).

The success of popular western fiction has reinforced this exclusion. As historian Christine Bold has noted, with the rise of the dime novel, the fictional west emerged as a virile, healthy alternative to the perceived decadence of the industrial East.¹³ Led by the mass market publishers Beadle and Adams, the "formula western" defined a genre that remains vital yet today. Instead of grappling with the complexities of "society," western heroes confronted destiny, Nature, and barbarism. The hero usually found himself caught between wilderness and civilization, and when he resolved the problem at hand he restored an ideal world, without disorder, uncertainty, or limitation.¹⁴ Such a formula left little role for clerical figures of any variety.

This points to the third theme: the generally awkward depiction of western religious figures. At best, one can say only that the literary image of the frontier clergyman has been mixed. Rarely has a fictional cleric been presented as a strong figure. Most western writers or filmmakers have been unable to treat the clergy other than in caricature. In *The Virginian* Owen Wister's Calvinist evangelist, "Dr. McBride," is the consummate fool, a position modified only slightly by Wister's praise of "The [Episcopal] Bishop." Canadian Ralph Connor's *The Sky Pilot* or Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* are the only examples to break from this mold. Filmmakers have wrestled with this problem for years. Because they need to appeal to the widest possible audience, film clergy have always lacked precise definition. Most clergymen on the screen are referred to as "Father," "Padre," or "Reverend"—titles vague enough to include anyone from Roman Catholic, high church Episcopalian, Congregationalist, Southern Baptist, or Tennessee snake handler.

In all fairness, however, the subject matter of the clergy and religious faith does not lend itself well to literary or film treatment. French critic Simone Weil has examined this theme with skill. In real life, she noted, evil is monotonous and boring. Good, on the other hand, is continuously fresh, sweet, and surprising. But the reverse is true in fiction. In fiction it is the good that is monotonous and boring. Goodness really has no story. Fictional evil, however, is "varied, and intriguing, attractive, profound, and full of charm."¹⁵

Thus the stories of clerical knaves and incompetents make the best reading. The following tales all derive from the Gilded Age West: A Colorado churchman complained that his city attracted all the clerical "freaks," none of

13. Christine Bold, *Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860–1960* (Bloomington, 1987), p. xii.
14. John G. Cawelti, "Prolegomena to the Western," *Western American Literature* 4 (1970): 259–271; Note carefully the lack of clerical references in the otherwise excellent compilations by Clyde A. Milner II, ed. *Major Problems in the History of the American West* (Lexington, Ky., 1989), and Frank Bergon and Zeese Papanikolas, eds., *Looking Far West: The Search for the American West in History, Myth, and Literature* (New York, 1978).
15. Simone Weil, "Morality and Literature," from the *Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichias (Mt. Kisco, N.Y., 1977), pp. 290–291.

whom lasted long. Another denounced the wave of "Petticoat Parsons" who spent all their time visiting the women of his parish. A Presbyterian pastor in Longmont, Colorado, wrote silly notes to the women in his congregation and walked about in wet weather with newspapers tied to his feet. A Rawlins, Wyoming, congregation demanded their pastor resign when his sermons approached two hours in length. An Episcopal congregation in Grand Forks, North Dakota, changed the lock on the church door in hopes that it would drive their rector away. "I can send you a dozen men at short notice," the Episcopal Bishop of Pennsylvania wrote his New Mexican counterpart, J. Mills Kendrick, in 1902, "but I fear none of them would wear well."¹⁶

The constitutional separation of church and state points to the fourth reason why the clergy are missing from the myth of the West.¹⁷ The voices of Serra and Kino in the Southwest and Edwards and Williams on the East Coast spoke (more or less) for a single people who shared a single faith. Their stature as regional figures reflects this peculiar circumstance.

After 1789, however, the United States could never have any institution that served as "the Church." Instead, American religious life was forever cast into the mold of "denominations." Spread along theological, sectional, ethnic, and social class lines, no single denomination could hope to encompass the variety of the American religious spectrum. As Father John Courtney Murray would later note, religious pluralism is inherent in the human condition.¹⁸ Nowhere was this more true than in the western United States.

Along the eastern seaboard, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians could claim a cultural preeminence over various "outsiders" by simple virtue of being there first.¹⁹ Not so with the West. Spanish Catholics had settled the Borderlands in the sixteenth century. The 1847 Mormon trek to the valley of the Great Salt Lake introduced the first religious enclave to the region. Mennonites, Hutterites, Freethinkers, and a host of lesser-known groups all arrived simultaneously with the Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. The Gilded Age West manifested a religious/ethnic pluralism that the East recognized only later and often with reluctance.

Generally speaking, however, the major religious groups in the post-Civil War West were: the six mainline Protestant denominations, the Roman Catholics, the Mormons, and the Jews. But no group produced a clerical figure strong enough to carry the national mythology. Few Gilded Age rabbis

16. C. W. Boynton to John Mills Kendrick, 19 January 1902, Box 1, JMK Papers, Archdiocese of the Rio Grande, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

17. See the essays in Merrill D. Peterson and Robert C. Vaughan, eds., *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom* (Cambridge, 1988).

18. Cited in Martin E. Marty, *Religion and Republic: The American Circumstance* (Boston, 1987), p. 235.

19. R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York, 1986), details the life of these groups.

spoke beyond their own constituency. And the Mormons have no clergy. Virtually every young Mormon male takes on clerical functions as part of his ordinary duties. In fact, the Mormons blamed the nation's clergy for the anti-Mormon Edmunds Act of 1882 and the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887. As one Mormon spokesman put it, "[The ministers] have declared war on us and are therefore legitimate targets for counter attack. Unable to agree among themselves on tenet and doctrine, they have yet found, deep in their spiritual bosoms, a common bond of union, hatred of the Mormons."²⁰ Mormon-Gentile tension remained constant all through the period. Its literary culmination came with the Mormon villains in Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*.

While the Catholic church maintained cultural dominance in several Western regions, it also wrestled with ethnic divisions of its own. Most Northwest Coast Jesuits were Italian by birth. Lamy immigrated from France and always distrusted the local Hispanic clergy; he dismissed several of them and brought over replacements from France and Italy. In large western cities German or Irish bishops often faced Polish, French, and Eastern European parishioners, many of whom chafed under their direction. The California hierarchy never really understood its Mexican-American parishioners.²¹ Thus even where they enjoyed cultural hegemony the Catholic church could not speak with a single voice.

The Protestant denominations faced similar difficulties. Frontier Protestant clergymen usually cooperated with their colleagues on church building, Thanksgiving services, temperance crusades, and issues of community welfare. But they also encroached on each other's territory with regularity. Whenever the prospect of government funds surfaced—as in schooling for Hispanics in New Mexico or for the Indians—region-wide denominational rivalries always surged to the fore.

Moreover, the ministers' private correspondence reveals a distinct undercurrent of denominational rivalry. A Congregational pastor in Helena, Montana, wrote his mother that the local Unitarians were "refined rationalists" and the Episcopal church "a church of St. Judas." The secretary of the Presbyterian Home Mission Board warned Sheldon Jackson that Episcopal Bishop J. Mills Kendrick was planning to "take New Mexico. He evidently thinks the canonicals and vestments will do it! Well, let him try."²²

20. Charles S. Peterson, *Take Up Your Mission: Mormon Colonizing Along the Little Colorado River, 1870-1900* (Tucson, Ariz., 1973), p. 242; Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana, Ill., 1985); the quotation comes from a citation in John Howard Melish, *Franklin Spencer Spalding: Man and Bishop* (New York, 1917), p. 169.

21. Jeffrey M. Burns, "The Mexican American Catholic Community in California, 1850-1980," in Guarneri and Alvarez, *Religion and Society*, pp. 255-273.

22. R. L. Hartt to Mother, Hartt Manuscripts, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana; cited in Szasz, *Protestant Clergy*, p. 91.

Behind all this antagonism lay a Protestant versus Catholic tension, perhaps the most persistent religiocultural theme of the entire nineteenth century. The Whitmans and Spaldings, for example, were all steeped in the anti-Catholicism of their age. Sheldon Jackson expressed similar opinions. A biographer of de Smet has politely observed that "his kindly tolerance extended to all except religionists of non-Catholic persuasion."²³ South Dakota Benedictine Martin Marty contested Episcopal Bishop William Hobart Hare for years; the Jesuits and Methodists/Presbyterians of New Mexico also fought editorial wars in their respective journals. Such antagonism, of course, needs to be understood within the context of its time. But myth moves in a timeless dimension. Such fragmentation points to reason number five.

The myth of the American West is a democratic myth. It has provided a unifying theme that brings together a widely divergent cast of characters. Unlike the mythological "Matter of Britain" or "Matter of France," the "Matter of America" does not celebrate a single people, who might differ in social status but still share a single faith. The western myth contains no such social hierarchy. It has no emperors, kings and queens, knights or nobles, princes or princesses. It involves no quests for a holy grail. Rather, the myth of the American West is a story of ordinary citizens, from every continent on earth. It tells, as the Goetzmanns have phrased it, "the tale of the American tribe."²⁴ Consequently, the American West performs a genuine ecumenical function.

Religion, on the other hand, has been a theme that divides. Why have the exploits of de Smet, Brother Van, Lamy, Jackson, Friedman, and Tuttle not become more widely known? Why has the tale of the Mormon trek from Missouri and Illinois to Utah not become a part of the national mythology? Is it not because these accomplishments have always been understood as the province of a single, sectarian group?²⁵

Religious division need not inevitably lead to bigotry. The United States has been remarkably free from the endless, unsolvable clashes that have plagued other areas of the globe. But these divisions have led to something else: a formulation of the national myth that specifically excludes all religious figures.

Fictional attempts to create a "generic clergyman" invariably fail. Like the generic "Indian," the generic "bishop," "priest," "minister," or "Sunday School worker" simply does not exist. The "bishop" might be Roman

23. J. S.---r, "Pierre-Jean De Smet," *Dictionary of American Biography*, p. 256.

24. William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination* (New York, 1986), p. ix.

25. Here I borrow ideas from Sidney E. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York, 1975); idem, *The Old Religion in the Brave New World* (Berkeley, 1977); idem, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York, 1963).

Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Episcopal, Methodist, Moravian, or Mormon; the priest might be Catholic or Episcopal. The minister might be Southern Baptist, Northern Baptist, Southern Methodist, Northern Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Unitarian, or whatever. Because they represent such different positions, the American clerics cannot be properly understood without this denominational label. Yet because of these links to the specific denominations, they can never really be “universalized” either.

Sixth, and finally, the Gilded Age clerics helped exclude themselves by their very *raison d'être*. Why has the American West had such continuous appeal? Why was the American frontier turned into a myth almost before it had ended in reality? The answers vary widely: awe in the face of a majestic, overpowering nature; the appeal of renewal in a virgin land; the eternal dream of prosperity and abundance; a revival of self-definition; an appeal to universal themes of heroism and patriotism; a desire to simplify the complexities of life; and so on.²⁶ Each of these suggestions is plausible; none should be completely dismissed. Yet behind all of this the universal appeal of the American West can probably be boiled down to a single word: “freedom.” As historian Ray Allen Billington phrased it, “the universal desire to lessen the controls necessary in today’s societies.”²⁷

But the clergy journeyed west as spokesmen for *increased* social controls. While their Christianity ended in grace and freedom, it began with original sin and a call for restraint. Thus the western clergy have played the role of Aunt Sally to Huck Finn, or the Sheriff of Nottingham to Robin Hood. This is not the material from which great legends are made.

“It isn’t just *your* frontier,” a British academic once chided Robert Athearn. “The frontier belongs to everybody.”²⁸ And because it does the denominational clergy will always be limited to its periphery. In spite of numerous accomplishments their denominational affiliations will forever keep them from entering the universal, timeless “Myth of the American West.”

26. See James K. Folsom, ed., *The Western: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1979); Warren French, “West as Myth: Status Report and Call for Action,” *Western American Literature* 1 (Spring, 1966); Jim L. Fife, “Two Views of the American West,” *Western American Literature* 1 (Spring, 1966); and Max Westbrook, “The Practical Spirit: Sacralty and the American West,” *Western American Literature* 3 (Fall, 1968).

27. Ray A. Billington, *America’s Frontier Culture* (College Station, Tex., 1977), p. 77.

28. Athearn, *Mythic West*, p. 186.