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Université de Nice Sophia Antipolis, 28 novembre 2014

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# Séminaire Agnieszka Soltysik-Monnet « Lincoln et la guerre : L'Adresse de Gettysburg dans la culture Américaine »

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- 1 In his history of religion in American foreign policy, Andrew Preston noted that US President Abraham Lincoln, although he did not claim to know God's will, believed that "he was an instrument of providence" (Preston, 2012, 173-4). The very idea that the Civil War was but a "divine test" is indeed reflected in his famous Gettysburg Address. Ever since it was delivered at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Pennsylvania on the afternoon of November 19th, 1863, not only has Lincoln's Gettysburg Address been commonly acknowledged as one of the greatest speeches in the history of the United States, it has also had a strong emotional resonance in the cultural psyche of the American people because it gave meaning to the Civil War and expounded it as a "glorious regeneration" both for the nation and for the world as a whole.<sup>1</sup> In light of contemporary historians' ever-increasing interest in the Address, Agnieszka Soltysik-Monnet proposed to study the speech not as a myth—"Ideology disguised as nature" as she put it—but rather as a historic document showing how similar American and European nationalisms were. Moving away from traditional historical scholarship depicting Lincoln as the hero of the American nation, she emphatically contended that, due to the dated character of this document, the President should not be used as a fig leaf to conceal contemporary American militarism.
- 2 At the beginning of her talk on the place of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address in American culture, Agnieszka Soltysik-Monnet, Professor of American Literature and Culture at the Université de Lausanne, pointed out that a handful of movies dealing with Abraham Lincoln were released in the last ten years. She mentioned in particular Steven

Spielberg's 2012 movie, in which two soldiers recite the speech in its entirety, and explained that Spielberg failed to break away from the usual dramatic and heroic depictions of the 16th President. The point is that, for many Americans, the speech actually came to represent Lincoln himself. To account for this phenomenon, Agnieszka Soltysik-Monnet conveyed the concept of "civil religion" to demonstrate that the Gettysburg Address was still very much prominent in linking the idea of a nation at war with the rhetoric of sacrifice and regeneration under the aegis of a powerful political leader. Not only has the US continually been at war since the Spanish-American War in the late nineteenth century—with a three-year period of interruption in the late 1970s —, but war is also a powerful means through which civil religion operates, intermingling history and Christian symbols. The Address, therefore, is not a mere substitute for Lincoln. It revealed to the American people what it was like to die for one's country and, according to some historians, it also contributed to a redefinition of the US as a nation.<sup>2</sup>

- 3 Considering the Address historically requires paying special attention to the context, which Agnieszka Soltysik-Monnet did when she contended that the ferocity of the war tended to be understated throughout the speech.<sup>3</sup> The latter was indeed delivered at a decisive stage of the war. Although the winding down of the war could not be foreseen at that time, the Union had managed to secure a military advantage over the Confederacy. Soltysik-Monnet's relevant remark that the day when it was drafted and the conditions in which it was written are still much written about these days concurs with many historians' current scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, not only was Lincoln influenced by his entourage, such as scholar and diplomat Edward Everett, it must also be recalled that he only spoke for three minutes. Despite its short duration, the speech remains rhetorically appealing. Quite paradoxically, Lincoln uses biblical notions to conjure up the secular creation, foundation, and impregnation of the American nation. This is not the only paradox which Agnieszka Soltysik-Monnet pointed out. For example, although it is often cited as an instance of American exceptionalism, the metaphor of the nation as a living organism, which is at the core of the Gettysburg Address, situates the speech in the context of nineteenth-century European nationalism. For that reason, Soltysik-Monnet regretted the dearth of comparativism in American studies, as historians tend to fall sway to the allure of American exceptionalism themselves.
- 4 The concept of "civil religion" particularly caught the attention of Soltysik-Monnet's audience. It was defined by late American ethnologist Robert N. Bellah as the veneration of past political leaders and the construction of memory sites erected in their honor. With the Gettysburg Address carved on its south wall, the Lincoln Memorial, where the President is "enshrined" forever, is a case in point to illustrate Bellah's concept. Most interestingly, Agnieszka Soltysik-Monnet pointed out the similarities between the design of the building and that of the Holy Temple of Zeus in Athens, between the might embodied by Lincoln seated in his chair and that of a powerful Greek god seated on his throne, and between the strength of American missiles and that of divine powers. Basing her analysis on the work of Jean-Paul Willaime, Soltysik-Monnet argued that the nation as it was presented in the Gettysburg Address shares traditional functions with religion, such as the right to kill and sacrifice, the promise of spirituality or, most importantly, the organization of time and space in terms of sacred and profane spheres. In other respects, civil religion helps consider the universality of the Gettysburg Address because, in its attempt to fill the "void within

humanity” (Paul De Man, 1996) exposed by modernity, it assumes that modern countries share similar forms of civil religion.<sup>5</sup>

- 5 The European Romantic conception of the nation presented by Hegel or Fichte underscores the idea that the nation is a living organism. As far as the Gettysburg Address is concerned, the Romantic vision that the nation should die in a coffin is congruent with other European nationalisms and it also conjugates with Lincoln’s mastery of alliterations and rhetoric. To illustrate this, Agnieszka Soltysik-Monnet pointed out that the poetic movement in the choice of words had a religious undertone, for example in the use of the traditionally religious word “score” in the phrase “Four score and seven years ago”. This poetic and overtly religious movement, she argued, recurs throughout the speech: “We cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground.”<sup>6</sup> The association of “hallow” and “ground” concurs with the religious myth of America being a Holy Land.<sup>7</sup> The nation, moreover, is clearly at the core of the speech which became famous for the phrase “one nation, under God” (added to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954).
- 6 Though all this clearly suggests that the Gettysburg Address belongs to a very specific rhetorical situation and to a particular political ontology, the “figurative fireworks” to which it exposes the audience is undeniably made of words, phrases and expressions that have found a second life. Not unsurprisingly, this second life is almost always linked to war contexts, as in Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929).<sup>8</sup> In the late 1980s, the phrase “shall not perish” was chosen as the motto of USS Abraham Lincoln (CN-72). It was aboard that aircraft carrier that George H. W. Bush proclaimed the end of the First Gulf War in 1991. More recently, Lincoln’s understatement for death (“the last full measure of devotion”) was used as a title for both a 1998 novel by Jeffrey Shaara published as part of a Civil War Trilogy, and an 18-minute film written and directed by Alexandra Kerry, John Kerry’s daughter.<sup>9</sup>
- 7 Most interestingly, the combination of all these carefully-selected words accordingly creates a mythology which can be found in documents not always related to American culture and thus becomes universal. For example, the phrase “government of the people, by the people, for the people” was reprised in the Constitution of the French Fifth Republic which, it must be noted, was drafted in the context of the Algerian War of Independence. By way of comparison, moreover, the issue of civil religion was extended to France in the discussions following Soltysik-Monnet’s talk. Though the Gettysburg Address cannot be separated from war, it also demonstrates that, because of its bearing on Romantic nationalism, the emergence of American nationalism is not so far from its European counterparts, most notably in its emphasis on the idea of liberty.
- 8 It seems, therefore, that the Gettysburg Address as a mythopoetic document not only teaches about the birth of the United States as a modern nation, but it also sheds light on the extent to which Lincoln was mythicized, that is to say, became the subject of this very modern myth which, paradoxically enough, emphasizes American particularism and, at the same time, finds its roots in the rise of Romantic nationalism in Europe. If we compare the two, it is clear that the wave of nationalism that swept the European continent throughout the nineteenth century was the consequence of social change, religious decline and industrialization. With the Gettysburg Address, at a time when the United States—less than one hundred years old—was more divided than ever, the nation became like a religion. With Lincoln’s death occurring on Good Friday (April 14th, 1865) while he was still in office, the blood shed by John Wilkes Booth indeed

contributed to forge a sort of death bond. Established under the sponsorship of a newly-founded civil religion as it was, it gave the President certain divine attributes that, interestingly enough, are to be seen in the handful of recent movies showing Lincoln as a zombie-killer or a vampire-hunter.

- 9 Taking all the recent movies featuring Lincoln as one of its main protagonists, it can be argued that filmic depictions of the late President, diverse as they are, are in fact numerically more fictional than biographical. In other words, as Agnieszka Soltysik-Monnet put it, Lincoln the killer is as fascinating as Lincoln the savior. She therefore concluded that such a reemergence of his figure in contemporary American culture is certainly not trifling. On the federal level, the election of the first black president marks the continuation and end of a long struggle that began with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. Yet, this phenomenon also shrouds a nation divided against itself. The “collateral damage” of war—a theme so pivotal to the Gettysburg Address—is not insignificant either. As Soltysik-Monnet contended, in all the territories where the US has been involved militarily, natives have never been entitled to any civil or human rights. She argued that they could be likened to what Giorgio Agamben conceptualized as the *homo sacer*, a person deprived of all functions in civil religion that you can kill but not sacrifice, though instead of being the exception, they have become the rule.
- 10 Of course, as it was pointed in the discussions following Soltysik-Monnet’s talk, Abraham Lincoln cannot be held responsible for the state of the contemporary American militarism with which he is irrevocably associated. His function as a “fig leaf” is rather to conceal or understate it and to make war sound “holy.” Because the birth of the modern American nation is so pivotal to the Gettysburg Address, it depicts soldiers giving their lives in the name of the nation’s survival. And, while “Lincoln separates the United States from other nations by its birth from a proposition,” as Gary Wills contended (Wills, 1992, 58), the Gettysburg Address shows that the Civil War was more than a mere experiment “testing” whether a nation dedicated to that proposition can endure. For historians, it teaches us that the emphasis is not so much on American exceptionalism and that war must be rethought with no Romantic nationalism and/or National mysticism.
- 11 What can ultimately be drawn from Agnieszka Soltysik-Monnet’s lecture is that, in many respects, the Gettysburg Address and Lincoln’s feats of political oratory resorting to public sentiment and populism have tended to overshadow his real political achievements. In fact, this point is not as new in American historiography as it may sound. In the last decades, for instance, Harold Holzer, former co-chairman of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission (ALBC) and chairman of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Foundation since 2010, has greatly contributed to a new understanding of the “war for public opinion” that took place throughout the Lincoln Years, arguing that most of the legends surrounding Lincoln are actually unsupported by facts (Holzer, 2014, 449).
- 12 Accordingly, Agnieszka Soltysik-Monnet’s in-depth study of the Gettysburg Address adds weight to what might seem to be a new trend of historical revisionism or, rather, reinterpretation. But it also shows us that, in order to truly appreciate the realities of American history, historians need to take into account the mythical value or symbolic density with which historical documents are imbued. Thus, all the images contained in the Gettysburg Address and the way these have added new national myths to American

cultural memory can probably teach us more about contemporary America than about the Civil War itself.<sup>10</sup>

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## NOTES

1. A phrase used at the time by the theologian Philip Schaff.
2. For Bradford Vivian, it helped redefine national identity and also “transformed the political principles first proffered in the Declaration of Independence [...] into transcendent articles of liberty applicable to all people everywhere” (Vivian, 2010, 146). Similarly, Gary Wills famously spoke of the Gettysburg Address as *The Words That Remade America* (1992).
3. For Agnieszka Soltysik-Monnet, the idea of “testing” the nation, for instance, is a clear indication of that.
4. Gary Wills for example.
5. Paul de Man conceived European Romanticism as a loose pseudo-religious attempt at rejecting the “void” of modernity within “the human self” (De Man, 1996, 17). Agnieszka Soltysik-Monnet argued that this “void” could be felt in the text as it translates into a sense of malaise seen in the grammatically nonsensical combination of “highly” and “resolve” in “that we here highly resolve that [...]”.
6. In a typically oral enumerative manner, Lincoln moves from the fairly neutral verb “dedicate” to the less informal “consecrate” and, finally, to the religious-denotative “hallow.”
7. A myth which, as Bellah argued, has been characteristic of the United States since the colonization era.
8. The novel is set during the 1915-1918 Italian Campaign of the Great War: “I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious and sacrifice and the expression in vain. [...] I had

seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory. [...] There were many words that you could not stand to hear [...] abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene.” Insofar as they echo Lincoln’s Address (“that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain”), the use of the words “in vain” and “hallow” is particularly significant.

9. Among many examples, *The Last Full Measure* (2004) by A. Kerry is set two years before the end of the Vietnam War. It depicts nine-year-old Kathrine Barnes waiting for her father to return from the war.

10. This is precisely what William D. Dean contended when he used the Gettysburg Address, together with the American flag, to illustrate what British philosopher Alfred Whitehead had called national symbols, that is to say, in Dean’s words, “pictures of the nation [brought] into solidarity with vague physical feelings of the whole national reality. [These] new national symbols,” Whitehead claims, “arise in times of cultural disruption, when an established picture of the nation no longer connects to an emerging emotional sense of the whole” (175).

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**Subjects:** Actualité de la recherche

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