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"Let’s Get behind Old Glory and the Church of Jesus Christ": Religion, American Narratives, and the 1920s Klan

Forget the idea of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan being an organization that flogs and tars and feathers people. Nor is it an organization that sneaks around into people’s back yards trying to get something on somebody. We do, however, bring the transgressor to justice through the duly constituted officers of the law. Let us look beyond the horizon and see this thing from a national standpoint. Let us see to the influx of unfit foreign immigration. . . . Let’s get behind Old Glory and the church of Jesus Christ.
—IMPERIAL NIGHT-HAWK (1924)

In the long course of bigotry and violence, the Klan has evoked the rebelliousness of the Boston Tea Party, the vigilantism of American pioneers and cowboys, and the haughty religion of the New England Puritans. In its corruption of American ideals, it has capitalized on some of the best-loved aspects of the American tradition.
—WYN CRAIG WADE (1987)

In the hot Georgia summer of 1913, Mary Phagan, an employee of the National Pencil Company in Atlanta, Georgia, traveled to the factory to get her check. The day was Confederate Memorial Day, and “little Mary Phagan,” as the Georgia press dubbed her, missed the parade held in honor of the Confederacy and the newer South. The next morning, Newt Lee, the night watchman, found her brutalized, dead body in the basement of the factory. The case of who murdered Phagan played out in the Georgia press, and her death proved to be apt fodder for the newspapers and their editors, who focused upon her youth, her innocence, and her job as a factory worker. Her image graced the front pages alongside lengthy descriptions of her unfortunate death. The iconic image of little Mary Phagan emphasized her youthful appearance, vulnerability, and her whiteness. Her faint smile and blonde hair tied in bows were incongruent with the horror of her murder and the possibility of rape. For the newspapers and Georgia’s male citizenry, the death of little Mary Phagan required not only justice but also swift vengeance for the murderer of one so young and supposedly innocent. She became a warning to other girls, women,
and their parents of the danger lurking for defenseless white women. Phagan’s murder emerged as the tragic tale of a young white woman in the South as an unprotected member of the labor force, as well as of the obvious failure of white men to protect their families, especially their young daughters, from such a gruesome fate. The sensational murder gained coverage not only in the local Georgia press but also in the surrounding states and the larger nation. The *Columbus (Georgia) Ledger* editorialized that “whatever the investigations may disclose, this we know at once, that the victim was a brave little working girl, striving to take up her burden in life and to win her daily bread. This is an appeal to public conscience in this one fact which should not be disregarded. That she was in some way a victim to her own youth and beauty makes this tragedy complete.”

The tragedy of Mary Phagan showcased the growing presence of teenagers and children in Southern factories and the dire and uncertain working conditions under which many young women labored. Phagan’s symbolic import outweighed her individual life. The *Ledger* continued that “these defenseless little women” needed much protection and care. Speculation ran wild in the Georgia press about whether the murderer would even be brought to justice. The decree for her murderer’s death reverberated in the newspapers because of this loss of “one pure and innocent life.”

The Atlanta police detained several male suspects for Phagan’s murder, but they finally settled upon Leo Frank, a Northern Jew who was the manager of the National Pencil Company, as the culprit behind Phagan’s gruesome murder. Frank’s nervousness, his outsider status, and the testimony of another employee, Jim Conley, an African American janitor, made him the prime suspect. Conley’s testimony during the subsequent trial cinched the general solicitor Hugh Dorsey’s case. Conley testified about Frank’s supposed lewd sexual relationships with other young female factory workers as well as his own role in moving Phagan’s dead body to the basement at Frank’s insistence. His testimony revolving around Frank’s supposed sexual encounters shocked and fascinated the press, who provided the sordid details to the general public.

In August of 1913, a jury convicted and sentenced Frank to death for the murder of Phagan, and Frank’s lawyers appealed the convic-
tion. By June of 1915, Governor William Slaton commuted Frank’s sentence to life in prison because of his own doubt about various inconsistencies in evidence and the questionable witness testimony. The threat of mob violence appeared real during Frank’s trial, and the governor feared the impact of potential violence on the climate of the trial and the subsequent ruling. By and large, the citizens of Georgia, however, were not persuaded by Slaton’s doubt and ruling on the trial, and some Georgians believed that the governor allowed a miscarriage of justice by changing the death sentence to life imprisonment. At demonstrations supporting the execution of Leo Frank, supporters sang “The Ballad of Mary Phagan” (1915), in which Phagan’s murder was perpetrated by Frank, who was judged for his crime in the afterlife. The ballad proclaims, “Come, all you jolly people, / Wherever you may be, / Suppose little Mary Phagan / Belonged to you or me.” The ballad expressed the opinion of many Georgians, who wanted justice for Phagan’s death. Those who sang the verses of the ballad assured little Mary Phagan’s place in heaven with the angels and Frank’s future residence in hell. It is not surprising with the previous threats of violence, then, that some men decided to take Frank’s life into their own hands and guarantee his punishment.

The Knights of Mary Phagan, a group of local men ranging from politicians to members of the Phagan family, organized, planned, and subsequently lynched Leo Frank. In August of 1915, a group of twenty-five men broke into the state prison in Milledgeville, Georgia, where Frank was serving a life term, and kidnapped Frank, delivering him to Phagan’s hometown of Marietta, Georgia, to be lynched. The Knights hanged Frank in front of a gathering crowd as retribution for Phagan’s death. Georgian newspapers were quick to report the details of Frank’s “mashed and disfigured body” and the “clamoring mob.” The Columbus Sun-Enquirer described with relish the mob’s attempts at mutilating the body: “The crunching of flesh could be heard above the shouts to stop.” National news outlets did not report with the same glee the lynching of Frank. The New Republic ran a poem channeling little Mary Phagan’s position on her alleged murderer’s death: “You care a lot about me, you men of Georgia, not that I am dead. . . . You have broken into a prison and murdered a man that I might be avenged. . . . It is like what the preacher told me about Christ: People
hated Him when He was alive. But when He was dead they killed man after man for His sake.”

While many white Georgians celebrated the death of Frank as fitting retribution for the murder of a young white girl, others in the nation decried the travesty of Frank’s fate. One rabbi proclaimed, “The lynching of Leo Frank is an atrocious horror. . . . The whole Nation is humiliated by this sickening tragedy. The whole nation expresses its horror.” Yet the nation read and consumed newspaper accounts of Frank’s lynching at the hands of vengeful white men. While some reports lamented Frank’s fate and others celebrated his righteous death, the gruesome details appeared in both. Frank was a lingering lesson, which centered upon white men taking justice and, of course, punishment into their own hands. Frank’s lynching metamorphosed from a grisly lynching into a moral stand for local communities, national culture, and the protection of the vulnerable white women. The death of little Mary Phagan and the lynching of Leo Frank primed Atlanta, the larger state of Georgia, and more largely the nation for the rebirth of a white men’s movement from the recent past, the Ku Klux Klan. A reactionary populist and Georgia newspaper editor, Tom Watson even suggested that a newer version of the order could restore “home rule.”

The Knights of Mary Phagan paved the way for the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

An ex-minister, William Simmons, answered the call for rebirth and created the second incarnation of the Klan. His inspiration appeared in the form of D. W. Griffith’s film *Birth of a Nation* (1915), based on Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* (1905), a romanticized rendition of the Reconstruction Klan. Dixon, a Southerner and a minister, preached a “gospel of white supremacy.” The Clansmen showcased the Klan’s role as the savior of the South. Griffith created a three-hour film on twelve reels at a record cost of $110,000 and renamed the film *Birth of a Nation.* Like the novel, the film portrayed the Klan as the heroes of the South, who triumphed over the “animalistic” blacks that threatened to annihilate their culture. The film generated as much controversy as admiration, and for many white Americans, it confirmed their fears about African Americans. The romantic view of the Klan appealed to white America and affirmed a past that had not occurred. The KKK emerged from both film and novel as the “savior of the white race against the
criminality of the black race.” In early 1915, Simmons, a fraternalist and former Methodist minister, was in a car accident that kept him bedridden for three months. Simmons drew figures of Klansmen, created a new organizational structure based on the previous 1867 order, and developed new terminology for the fraternity. When he regained his health, Simmons constructed a new Ku Klux Klan in an Atlanta atmosphere charged by anti-Semitism in the aftermath of the lynching of Leo Frank. In October 1915, Simmons recruited thirty-four members to become his Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, which he later incorporated. On Thanksgiving Day, Simmons and nineteen of his Knights marched up Stone Mountain and lit a cross on fire. The burning cross marked the beginning of the second order of the Klan. However, a dentist, Hiram Welsey Evans, eventually wrested control of the beloved order from Simmons. Evans, the newly appointed Imperial Wizard, continued Simmons’s vision of an advanced fraternity.

Such is the standard story from Frank’s demise to Simmons’s creation to Evans’s control. This narrative binds the lynching of Frank to the stellar rise and fall of the second Klan. But what is missing is not the 1920s Klan’s dedication to nation, the rights of white men, and the vulnerability of white women but the prominent place of religion, specifically Protestant Christianity, in the Klan’s print culture, fraternal ritual, and theatrical displays. When the Klan’s vision of Protestantism is placed at the front and center of an analysis, a different presentation of the order emerges that illuminates the dominance of the Klan’s racial, religious, and intolerant views in America from the 1910s through the 1930s. In the many tellings and retellings of the Klan story, narrators mention Simmons’s religious involvement, but it is not essential to the story. Simmons was formerly a minister who created a new Klan firmly enshrouded in the language of Protestantism. For the first Imperial Wizard, God had smiled upon America. It was momentous that he founded the Klan on Thanksgiving Day, a day of celebration of the Pilgrims, who came to the New World in search of religious tolerance. As the angels had smiled upon the Pilgrims, so they did upon the new order.

Faith was an integral part of that incarnation of the order. Simmons articulated the religious vision, which Evans and many Klan lecturers (often ministers) continued. The Klan, for Simmons and Evans, was not
just an order to defend America but also a campaign to protect and celebrate Protestantism. It was a religious order. The popular story, however, neglected the place of everyday religion within the ranks of Klansmen and Klanswomen and instead focused on the Klan’s vitriol toward Catholics, Jews, and African Americans. The focus on Old Glory, the flag, and patriotism resonated in various tellings, yet the emphasis upon the dedication to the “church of Jesus Christ” remained underplayed and underanalyzed. Protestantism became secondary in descriptions of the Klan because of the order’s apparent nativism, racism, and violence. The Klan gained a following because of its twin messages of nation and faith, and the fraternity progressed because of members’ commitment to its religious vision of America and her foundations.

Moreover, those twin messages resounded because of social change in the United States. Immigration, urbanization, and the internal migrations of African Americans made the Klan’s white, patriotic, and Protestant message appealing. From 1890 to 1914, over 16 million immigrants arrived in the United States, and 10 percent of those immigrants were Jewish. As historian Jay Dolan reported, a vast majority of those immigrants were Catholics from Ireland, Germany, Italy, and Poland. In reaction to immigration and World War I, nativism emerged as a popular response to “hyphenated” Americans. Immigrant groups who did not support the war were even more suspect. As sociologist Kathleen Blee noted, “The Klan’s underlying ideas of racial separation and white Protestant supremacy . . . echoed throughout the white society of the 1920s, as religious and racial hatreds determined the political dialogue in many communities.” White supremacy was a common belief in the early twentieth century, but the Klan’s political action, public relations campaigns, and the production of material artifacts identified it as a distinct movement. By 1918 there were fifteen chapters of the new Klan. With rising popularity, Simmons, and later Evans, sought to eliminate the violent image of the Reconstruction Klan without much success.

Paramilitary movement to defend the hallowed Southern Way of Life.

The Reconstruction Ku Klux Klan emerged in 1866 in Pulaski, Tennessee. Six Confederate veterans claimed they organized a club to play
“pranks” on the residents of Pulaski to uplift the spirits of the war-torn region. The first Klan was primarily motivated by concerns about Reconstruction’s effect on Southern social structure. As such, it particularly targeted African Americans, “carpetbaggers,” and other Northern whites for the unsettling of Southern life. The “club” created their name from the Greek word *kuklos*, meaning circle, and they added the word “klan” to represent their Scotch-Irish ancestors. The first Ku Klux Klan was a supposed social organization for white men. Immediately, they adopted a white uniform with “tall conical witches’ hats of white cloth over cardboard [that] completely concealed their heads,” which “exaggerated the height of the wearer, adding anywhere from eighteen inches to two feet to his stature.” The costumes mimicked the ghosts of the Confederate dead. However, the Klan’s pranks were not innocent because members targeted freed blacks. The pranks were reminiscent of the decades-old actions performed by planters and overseers to frighten slaves into submission. The popularity of the Klan grew in Tennessee, and by the end of 1866, the jokes had turned violent and occasionally deadly. In 1867 the ever-growing group needed structure and a popular leader that would spread the “social club” throughout the South. At a Nashville convention, the Klan reorganized and specified its aims of chivalry, humanity, mercy, and patriotism.

The early Klan saw Southern whites as victimized by Reconstruction, and members opposed any who destabilized their worldview, including blacks and supporters of blacks. A historian of the Klan, Michael Newton, has argued that in April 1867 the Klan shifted from a club to a “paramilitary movement to defend the hallowed Southern Way of Life.” The “Invisible Empire” divided into sections by region, and Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest, a lauded Confederate veteran, became the official leader of the first Klan. By 1868 the Klan began raiding the homes of African Americans and supporters of black enfranchisement, interfering with elections and crafting a public image through parades as well as cryptic warnings. The Reconstruction Klan targeted African Americans because of the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, which granted African American men the right to vote. Many of the black victims of the Klan were voting Republicans. The Klan confronted the “violent and brutal” officials
who upheld black civil rights while victimizing white men and women.\textsuperscript{28} Whites saw themselves as victims of Reconstruction and a shifting political climate, and the Klan reacted to any threat to white dominance.

Also in 1868 the Klan had spread into Kentucky, Missouri, West Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, Southern Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. The Freedmen’s Bureau and eventually the federal government became concerned with their raids and violent actions.\textsuperscript{29} In 1871 Congress passed the Ku Klux Klan Act to protect voters and the Fourteenth Amendment, and with the federal crackdown on their actions the Klan declined. The Invisible Empire dissipated. However, the presence of the Klan had forever marked the Southern imagination, and William Simmons adopted the larger heritage of the Klan for his newer version, but he attempted to avoid the violent legacy. By June of 1920 Simmons approached the Southern Publicity Association to advertise his organization in order to modify its image. The association’s owners, Elizabeth Tyler and Edward Clarke, presented the Klan as a fraternal Protestant organization that championed white supremacy as opposed to marauders of the night. Their efforts proved effective. Membership increased, and the Klan claimed chapters in all forty-eight continental states.\textsuperscript{30}

By 1924 membership peaked at four million members as Americans pledged their support to the order, wore robes, lit crosses, and marched in parades.\textsuperscript{31} Despite the large membership of the order, scholars, the media, and the general public relied on stereotypes of Klansmen as backward, rural people who lacked education, refinement, and tolerance. That portrayal claimed that Klansmen loathed societal changes, lamented their class status, and embraced their anger as a motivating tool for their activism. Anger and frustration motivated the second Klan’s theatrics and political campaigning. Writing in the 1920s, John Moffatt Mecklin popularized that particular portrayal of Klansmen, which has remained the most common characterization of the order throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mecklin’s Klansmen embraced their supposed rural roots as well as fundamentalist Christianity to right the social wrongs; fundamentalism, then, became the backbone of the order and motivated Klansmen in their quest to restore the nation.
More recent studies of the order contradict this particular presentation of Klansmen, and occasionally Klanswomen, as backward, rural, uneducated, and fundamentalist.32 These studies demonstrate that Klansmen were bankers, lawyers, dentists, doctors, ministers, businessmen, and teachers. Most of the membership was firmly of the middle class and had access to education. Klan members were Quakers, Baptists, Methodists, Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and United Brethren, to name only a few.33 They were highly critical of liberal Protestant theologians who used historical criticism and science in biblical interpretation. Klansmen were more evangelical than fundamentalist. The order was more rooted in mainline Protestantism than the stereotype recognizes. Moreover, the 1920s Klan was a populist
movement that attempted to reform so-called societal ills with religion and politics. Geographically, the Klan emerged in the rural South, the urban North, the Midwest, and the Pacific Northwest. There were klaverns in Georgia, Alabama, and Florida, as well as in Indiana, New Jersey, Colorado, and Oregon. Rural and urban, educated and working class, the order proved more diverse and mainstream than those early popular stereotypes allow. Klansmen and Klanswomen were very similar to their neighbors, but they chose to join the order to communicate their distaste and poignant concern with the path of the nation.

In its heyday, the second incarnation of the KKK produced multiple newspapers and engendered flashy displays of membership ranging from outdoor naturalization ceremonies to marches and parades. The organization built membership from “ordinary, white Protestants,” who embraced Klan events, like picnics and pageants; and read Klan pamphlets, newspapers, novels, and flyers. In that way, the portrait of Klansmen as white-robed terrorists who haunt the dreams of all of their enemies ignored the full rendering of Klan experience. That portrait sidelined the Klan to the margins of American history despite its large membership and cultural influence. By labeling the order as a fringe movement of terrorists, the nefarious elements of the movement appear in historical narratives without explorations of its broader appeal to white Protestants. Yet its numerical strength and popularity require a reevaluation of the order and its place in our narratives to see how such a movement fits within our tellings and retellings of American history, especially American religious history.

To examine the Klan is to examine ourselves.

Klan historian Kenneth Jackson claimed that “to examine the Klan is to examine ourselves.” For Jackson, the second revival of the Klan (1915–1930) was representative of American culture rather than a peripheral movement of extremism. To understand the 1920s Klan as central to narratives of American history and American religious history calls into question narratives of Protestant progress, the origins of nationalism, relationships between religion and race, and the often hidden presence of intolerance. Jackson’s provocative statement demonstrates the need for a critical study of the 1920s Klan to under-