

Andrew Clayton, M.A.  
Baylor University, Department of Political Science

*The Obsessive Examination of the Human Prospect in Mad Men*<sup>1</sup>

“The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread.” Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

Matthew Weiner’s smash hit *Mad Men*, a period drama about the lives of New York City advertising executives in the 1960’s, provides an occasion for its viewers to examine their own lives. Moreover, it invites viewers to reflect on the human prospect. I shall argue that the writers of the show seem keenly aware, almost obsessively, of their project to set out yet another artistic vision of the lives of people who pursue the American dream and in that presentation they actually provide another vision of life at the “end of history.” The lives of the characters in the series revolve around two poles which are in tension. On the one hand, the show caricatures the pursuit of the indefinable “American dream.” In the words of the series’ quasi-protagonist, Donald Draper (Jon Hamm), there is “no American history, there is only the frontier.” According to this view, there is something to strive for (though the end of the pursuit is never stated) and history itself seems to push us constantly and progressively forward. Indeed, the pursuit of the American dream pushes people to look ever forward and never backward. On the other hand, the show simultaneously presents what looks like a view of modern man at the end of history. Many characters suffer from anxiety, depression, acute ennui, disconnection, sex addiction and alcoholism. We are left to conclude that having arrived at the modern age we have nothing left for which to live. This is our predicament and it is time that we got on with it. To be clear, the two views of life are totally opposed to one another; either we live the American

---

<sup>1</sup> Given the fact that *Mad Men* remains incomplete and is still in production, I hope simply to clarify and sharpen the major themes and questions of the series only as it has unfolded through the third season. I assume that the readers are somewhat familiar with the characters of the show as I am unable to provide a full exposition of the subtleties of each character. Moreover, the show presents a challenge for a project such as this, for it has been said that *Mad Men* is essentially a “mega-movie.” The first three seasons comprise approximately twenty-seven hours.

dream where there are an infinite number of frontiers or we live at the end of history, where there are no new frontiers to explore.

In both cases, we are left with a picture of atomistic individuals limitlessly pursuing their dreams or their desires, absent any community. The lack of community extends as far and as deep as the family, where we see characters intentionally break familial ties or purposefully neglect relationships within family. For instance, we find that fathers (particularly Don Draper, the anti-hero for the series) seem not to care about the moral education of their children; grown-up daughters, particularly Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss), willingly forget their heritage, reject their faith and resolutely adopt the modern, secular, fast-paced life of Manhattan. Thus, *Mad Men* draws into focus not only the way in which the two views of life discussed above damage the individual, but also how individuals who choose to live such lives damage future generations. What is truly bizarre about the series' development is that all of the characters are stuck between these two poles. What is more, the series seems to present no other *serious* options with one possible exception—namely the life of faith. So, in what follows I would like to explore the obsession both with the self-made man and man at the end of history and then consider why the show focuses narrowly on these closed views of modern life even as it offers only an indirect presentation of the life of faith.

#### *American Life: Life on the Frontier or Life at the End of History—the Paradox of Don Draper*

The first three seasons of the *Mad Men* series unmistakably revolve around two books which keep coming up in the dialogue between characters—Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) and Frank O'Hara's collection of poems, *Meditations in an Emergency* (1957). Indeed, the two books are in many ways presentations of the two aforementioned ways of life: namely the life of the American dream where there are infinite frontiers for an individual to explore and life at the “end of history.” Rand's lengthy novel, which is a fictional presentation of her philosophy of objectivism, is an encomium to the self-made

man who rationally pursues his own enlightened self-interest; in short he is the perfect hard-working American who can achieve anything. Much of her philosophy can be found in the dialogue between her characters. Most of her philosophy can be summed up in a statement of the hero of the novel, John Galt, who exclaims at one point that “All life is a purposeful struggle, and your only choice is the choice of a goal.” As if the reader could not perceive the author’s worldview by reading the novel, Rand explains at the end of *Atlas Shrugged* that “My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.” In a sense, Rand’s philosophy is the consummate philosophy of an American businessman. Man lives and works in a boundary-less world which becomes his own through his desires and activity. Should he fail to fulfill his desires (which are never stated and are never derived from his nature), the only person he can blame is himself.

We are first introduced to Rand’s novel by Bertram “Bert” Cooper (Robert Morse) who is the head partner of the advertising agency Sterling Cooper. At one point, after an account executive at Sterling Cooper, Pete Dyckman Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser), attempts to blackmail Draper by revealing his real identity to Cooper,<sup>2</sup> Cooper does something completely unexpected and pulls Draper into his office, hands him a check for \$2,500 and explains that “...we are alike. You are a productive and reasonable man, and in the end, completely self-interested.” He then informs Draper that he should use part of his \$2,500 bonus check to purchase a copy of Rand’s book.

---

<sup>2</sup> Donald Draper’s real name is Dick Whitman, crudely named after the body part. Draper assumes his pseudonym after he returns from the Korean War, where he stole the dog-tags off of a fallen soldier who died before his eyes. At various points in the show, we discover Don’s past: most importantly, he is the son of a prostitute and that he grew up in a very poor but religious home with an abusive father.

In a sense, Don Draper is Ayn Rand's consummate self-interested, self-made man in pursuit of the American dream. He is a man, we discover, who constantly attempts to abandon his past life of poverty for a life filled with all of the modern accretions. He has a beautiful house, a wife and two children, and enough money to purchase the coveted Cadillac—a symbol of his success and hard work. He enjoys fine food, fine libations but he never seems sated. Don displays the characteristics of the typical democratic man. As Alexis de Tocqueville explains in *Democracy in America*,

The inhabitant of the United States attaches himself to the good of this world as if he were assured of not dying, and he rushes so precipitately to grasp those that pass within his reach that one would say he fears at each instant he will cease to live before he has enjoyed them. He grasps them all but without clutching them, and he soon allows them to escape from his hands so as to run after new enjoyments.<sup>3</sup>

It would seem that Don Draper reveals both the vices of the democratic man and the virtues, as much as one can say that, of the Randian self-interested man who pursues his own desires and defines his own future. Democracy has a tendency to flatten a man's soul and plague him no answer to his infinite longings. This leads the democratic man, and Don, to search the world over for something to answer his longings.

At the same time, Don Draper seems to have no longings. He is therefore a bit of a paradox. He often seems to be a sort of Nietzschean last man. In a sense, for Don “the earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small...one still loves one's neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth.”<sup>4</sup> In the second season of the show, Frank O'Hara's *Meditations in an Emergency* consumes Don. He first comes across O'Hara's collection of poems while at lunch in a bar by himself. He notices that one of the customers in

---

<sup>3</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, “Why the Americans Show Themselves so Restive in the Midst of Their Well-Being,” In *Democracy in America*, Ed. and trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 512.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” In *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 129.

the bar is reading O'Hara's book and he inquires about it. The man assures Don that he would not understand it. So Don picks a copy for himself but he never picks up a copy of Ayn Rand's book.

Indeed, Rand's tome stands juxtaposed to Frank O'Hara's *Meditations in an Emergency*. O'Hara's *Meditations* presents the tragedy of life at the end of history. O'Hara's collection of poems is not unlike T.S. Elliot's *Wasteland*, in that they impart the feeling of anxiety and emptiness in modern life. The first episode of season two ends with a montage. Don Draper mails out a copy of *Meditations* to an undisclosed individual and at the same time we hear him read one of O'Hara's poems,

Now I am quietly waiting for  
the catastrophe of my personality  
to seem beautiful again,  
and interesting, and modern.

The country is grey and  
brown and white in trees,  
snows and skies of laughter  
always diminishing, less funny  
not just darker, not just grey.

For Don, life has no joy and no goodness. As Don explains in the season before to a couple of Bohemians complaining about consumerism and advertising, "I hate to break it to you but there is no big lie. There is no system. The universe is indifferent."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, life has no purpose or end, for as he says in season three, "change isn't good or bad; it just is."<sup>6</sup> Don straddles the line between these two poles; he is paradoxically the Randian self-interested, self-made man who restlessly pursues his desires but he also displays the characteristics of the last man living at the end of history. To be sure, the latter view is more pronounced in the series.

*"Mad Men" and the Life of Faith*

---

<sup>5</sup> Season 1, Episode 8 "The Hobo Code"

<sup>6</sup> Season 3, Episode 2, "Love Among the Ruins"

So, it would seem that *Mad Men* presents two bleak options and nothing else. However, there is at least a half-serious presentation of the life of faith during the second season of the show, which is not accidental. Serious religious matters—such as new life, death, and redemption—dominate the second season of the show more than any other season. For instance, the second episode of the season retells the story of the demise of American Airlines Flight 1 from the perspective of the characters at Sterling Cooper. We discover that Peter Campbell's father was on Flight 1. When Peter learns about his father's death, he remarks to Don "I don't even know what to do." The death of Marilyn Monroe as depicted in the ninth episode of the season seems to affect everyone in the office more than the American Airlines Flight 1 crash. In the penultimate episode of the season, Don Draper walks into the Pacific Ocean<sup>7</sup>, as if he is going through a rebirth or a baptism of sorts and in the final episode Don's wife, Betty Draper (January Jones), reveals that she is pregnant with their third child.

The explicit religious character of the season is made clearer through the introduction of Father John Gill S.J. (Colin Hanks). Of the four seasons of *Mad Men*, Fr. Gill only appears in season two and even then he only appears three times; he is also the only cleric or person of the religious life that appears in the series. As such, he is something of a caricature. He first appears in an episode aptly titled "Three Sundays," an episode which portrays the lives of the *Mad Men* characters from "Laetare Sunday" to Easter Sunday. Peggy Olson, the corporate-ladder climbing, newly installed copywriter from Sterling Cooper plays a prominent role in the episode. Ostensibly hung over, Olson retreats to the narthex of the church on her way home where she first meets Fr. Gill who convinces her to stay at Mass. Later that day they run into each other at

---

<sup>7</sup> Don has been out in California for a business trip but he decides to take some time off to visit an old friend who we find out was the real Don Draper's widowed wife. She is the only person he knows who knows nearly every detail about his life. The song that plays during Don's 'baptism' is George Jones' "Cup of Loneliness." The first line of the song reads, "I see Christian pilgrims so redeemed from sin. Called out of darkness a new life to begin, were you ever in the valley when the way is dark and dim? Did you ever drink the cup of loneliness with Him?"

dinner at Peggy's sister's house and he offers her a ride home. Once they arrive at Peggy's destination, he asks her permission to ask a "personal question." Having heard at dinner about her success as a copywriter on Madison Avenue, he asks Peggy for some tips for his upcoming homily on Palm Sunday. Peggy hesitates to offer any explanation submitting instead that "I don't know I'm your audience." Indeed, there is a double meaning in this. Not only does she fail to take her faith seriously, she never shows up for Palm Sunday Mass.

The final episode of season two steals the title of Frank O'Hara's *Meditations in an Emergency*. The Cuban Missile Crisis has gripped the nation and each character in *Mad Men* finds his own way to deal with the considerable possibility of death. We wonder if the recently, self-baptized Don Draper will arise to the serious occasion and confront the real possibility of death in a meaningful way; rather he, like most of the other characters, finds some solace by going to work. Peggy, however, once again finds herself in church where Fr. Gill delivers a sermon about how every person must prepare himself for a summit meeting with God. At the very end of the show, we see Peggy in bed make the sign of the cross before she turns off the light and to go to sleep.

But it is the second episode in which Fr. Gill appears, "A Night to Remember," that is important for the presentation of the life of faith in *Mad Men*. In that episode Weiner obviously paints a caricature of the life of faith through a single scene in which Fr. Gill finally confronts Peggy about her sin and her guilt for having had a child out of wedlock.<sup>8</sup> "Is there something

---

<sup>8</sup> Peggy conceives a child with Peter Campbell in season one during a one night stand, in fact in the first episode of the show. She has the child but gives the child to her sister to take care of. Fr. Gill learned about Peggy's "unwanted" child and sexual indiscretion through Peggy's sister who confesses she is "very angry at her sister." There is something cynical here in the representation of confession. Peggy's sister seemingly uses the Sacrament of Reconciliation to "tattle" on her sister to Fr. Gill who has taken a pastoral interest in Peggy; Fr. Gill technically breaks the "Seal of Confession" by using what learned in the confessional booth to get at (for lack for a better phrase) Peggy. We first see this when after Easter Mass, Fr. Gill hands Peggy an Easter egg and simply remarks that it is "for the child."

you need to talk about?” He asks plainly. “I notice you don’t take Communion. God already knows what it is.”

Peggy: Then I don’t need to talk.

Gill: But I’m here right now.

Peggy: I don’t think you’d understand.

Gill: God is bigger than what we were raised on.

Peggy: Father you don’t have to *live* life like the rest of us.

Gill: I wasn’t born a priest. When you distance yourself from the church you distance yourself from everything. That’s why it’s called Communion. It’s not just being with God it’s being with everyone. You are pushing everyone away.

Peggy: I’m not.

Gill: There is no sin too great to bring to God. You can reconcile yourself with Him and have a whole new start. Do you feel you don’t deserve his love?

Fr. Gill’s caricatured and heavy-handed attempt to bring about Peggy’s conversion noticeably fails to have any serious, immediate effect on her. Neither is his attempt subtle nor is the presentation of the life of faith in the conversation nuanced. Yet, the episode ends with a very real moment and honest depiction of what it means to live a life of faith. In his rectory, Fr. Gill removes his collar and priestly garb before he sits down to play, sing and (it seems) pray “Early in the Morning” by Peter, Paul and Mary.<sup>9</sup> We realize that his conscious choice to live the life of faith is in many ways just as serious and fragile as Peggy’s choice to reject it. One is reminded of Pope Benedict XVI’s thoughts about belief in the modern age in his *Introduction to Christianity*:

The believer is always threatened with an uncertainty that in the moments of temptation can suddenly and unexpectedly cast a piercing light on the fragility of the whole that usually seems so self-evident to him...in what is apparently a flawlessly interlocking world someone here suddenly catches a glimpse of the abyss lurking...under the firm structure of the supporting conventions...Fastened to the cross—with the cross fastened to nothing, drifting over the abyss. The situation could hardly be more accurately and impressively described.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> The first line of the song: “Well early in the morning, about the break of day, I ask the Lord, ‘Help me find the way!’ Help me find the way to the Promised Land. This lonely body needs a helping hand. I ask the Lord to help me please find the way.”

<sup>10</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004) 42-44.

What is so interesting and strange about the brief presentation of the life of faith in *Mad Men* is that almost nothing has been mentioned about it in the various cultural journals, political periodicals, and blogs which regularly provide commentary on the show. If Weiner and the writers of *Mad Men* were trying to make a point modern man's lack of openness to faith or about the useless aspects of faith, it has fallen on deaf ears. Yet, Weiner and the writers of the series are too serious and too parsimonious to have included Fr. Gill as some extraneous red herring for *Mad Men* fans. To be clear, Fr. Gill has a distinct purpose in the development of Peggy however his purpose is very unclear.

The religious themes of the show are largely abandoned and forgotten by the writers after season two, just as quickly as they are forgotten by the audience. In fact, by the start of season three, all of the religious aspects of the show have been all but completely abandoned as Weiner picks up with his narrative of America at the end of history. Betty Draper's father dies and we never see a funeral. Roger Sterling's daughter gets married and we never see the ceremony. What is more Peggy Olson the only character in the series who has been open to a life of faith, determinedly chooses to abandon her family and her faith. After the "Meditations in an Emergency" episode we never see Peggy in the pews of her family's parish again. Peggy, who obviously emulates Don Draper in every way, adopts his way of life which is to say the life of the self-made man. Like Don Draper, Peggy creates a place for herself on Madison Avenue through simple hard work and determination; she at once finds meaning and purpose in her work but at the same time finds it impossible to live life in the everyday sense. As she says to Don in a very frank discussion about equal pay, "I look at you and I think, 'I want what he has.' You have everything and so much of it."<sup>11</sup>

*Back to the End of History*

---

<sup>11</sup> Season Three, Episode Five "The Fog"

Indeed, the most explicit portrayal of the degeneration of the culture and the perils of life at the end of history come in season three. Weiner gave the show a new tagline in season three which appropriately characterizes the season and the series as a whole—“The World’s Gone Mad.” At one point in the season, there is a brief conversation about the World’s Fair which was in New York in 1964. The slogan of the fair is “Man in a Shrinking Globe in an Expanding Universe.” Weiner’s vision of generational decay and life at the end of history are on display in one particularly telling episode in season three, “My Kentucky Home.” In the episode, the executives of Sterling Cooper attend a decadent “Derby Day” party at a Long Island country club. One of the senior partners of the firm, Roger Sterling (John Slattery), sings “My Kentucky Home” on bended knee (and in black face) to his new, very young bride.<sup>12</sup> The scene ends with a voice-over of the high, Bourgeois Bohemian copywriter Paul Kinsey (Michael Gladis) quoting T.S. Eliot’s “Hollow Men”—“this is how the world ends, not with a bang but with a whimper.”

Earlier in the episode, Betty Draper’s father, Eugene (Ryan Cutrona) has Sally Draper (Kiernan Shipka) pedantically read aloud from *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. “The Praetorian bands, whose licentious fury was the first symptom and cause of the decline of the Roman empire” she reads. When she is sent to bed by her mother, he warns her that “You just wait. All hell’s gonna break loose.” The next morning Sally steals five dollars from her grandfather and he shamelessly blames the theft on the Draper’s black housekeeper. Later that day, after Eugene and the housekeeper spend a whole day trying to find the money, Sally sheepishly throws the money on the floor and declares that she has found it. Of course, her grandfather knows better but he does not say anything, he plays along and they eventually go back to reading from *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

---

<sup>12</sup> Roger Sterling gets a divorce near the end of season two. He then marries Don’s old 22 year old secretary, Jane Siegel (Peyton List). Jane happens to be the age of Roger’s only daughter.

The episode paints a vivid picture of both the decline and fall of generations and the ways in which the mediocrity that democracy imbues in citizens, leads individuals to neglect that which is worth preserving. Sally, who is the youngest individual in the episode, has no regard or love for grandfather. Her parents are not around to explain to her the problems of lying and stealing as they are off at the self-indulgent “Derby Party” where we see a man in black face sing to his second, puerile wife. Instead, Sally receives her education from a book she hardly understands and in the office of Sterling Cooper we see a young generation of copywriters, Peggy Olson and Paul Kinsey, tediously sitting around, trying to come up with creative advertisements for Barcardi. At once we have an older generation of “Praetorian Guards” (the executives of Sterling Cooper) refusing to care for that which is their own, namely their children and their work, and younger generations which have no understanding of what is right or good—indeed they are left wondering if this is “how the world ends.”<sup>13</sup>

### *Conclusion*

I have endeavored to demonstrate that the producer and writers of the hit series *Mad Men* consciously present a critique of American life and in particular, the notion of the American dream. In their presentation, we are invited to reflect on the human prospect. On the one hand, the show demonstrates the serious difficulties and problems of pursuing one’s individual desires purely in one’s self-interest. It shows the havoc left in the wake of individuals pursuing the Randian American dream. On the other hand, in attempting to present the problems of

---

<sup>13</sup> Natasha Simons from the National Review has a particularly interesting and helpful reading of the reading from Gibbon’s history. She writes, “The Praetorian guards, of course, were a specially chosen group of soldiers who abused their imperial power over Rome. *Mad Men* depicts a group of men who have great influence over what they consider their particular citizenry — consumers — and their particular emperor — consumerism. . . Weiner, consciously or unconsciously, is demonstrating the ways in which America’s Old Guard is leading the ’50s generation to its end by stubbornly refusing to go forward. Weiner has remarked of that generation of people, “[They were saying,] ‘We don’t want to be that way. We’d rather fail.’” “*Mad Men* and the Paradox of the Past” *National Review Online* July 19, 2009. <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/243490/i-mad-men-i-and-paradox-past-natasha-simons?page=1>

limitlessly pursuing the American dream, *Mad Men* displays characters at the end of history in a decaying society which lacks moral imagination and the energy necessary for the proper care of the preservation of society. As viewers this puts us in an odd place. Are we supposed to believe smugly that we live in a better time and place? We have recognized the foolishness of pursuing the American dream (though it is good to remind ourselves that we can no longer go down that path) and we have moved beyond, in a sense, segregation and racism (at least as it is displayed in the series). Nevertheless we are presented a vision of our past which contains nothing good so it is difficult to envision our future. It is impossible to see the chance of redemption in the world of *Mad Men* as there seems to be no hope for the future generations. The only possible way out of this problem is the life of faith which is quickly dismissed after the second season of the show. For a show that is unashamedly political and speaks to generational decay, it is unclear how we can arrive at what is ostensibly a more just society if our cultural and moral roots originate, at least partly, from those not-so-distant generations which lived through and endured the 1950's and 60's.

Now that we understand the difficulties of the purely self-interested man who endlessly pursues his desires and now that we have moved beyond the rampant sexism and racism of older generations, what remains that is worth fighting for or worth preserving? Presumably, Weiner attaches his vision of the past, generational decay, and the American future to something permanent by which we can use to adjudicate just how far we have come and how far back we can fall, but it is unclear what that may be. Instead we are left, lost like Don Draper and Weiner himself, in the dark and nihilistic view that "change isn't good or bad; it just is."