

Religious Myths  
and Visions of America

# GOD & Apple Pie



Christopher Buck

Introduction by J. Gordon Melton  
Distinguished Professor of American Religious History

# God & Apple Pie



Interior of the main sanctuary of Rodef Shalom synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with American and Israeli flags flanking the *bimah* (elevated podium from which the sacred Torah scroll is read aloud during a synagogue service).

Dr. J. Leonard Levy (Rabbi of Rodef Shalom Congregation from 1901–1917), prepared a special Passover *haggadah* (“the telling” of Exodus, recited on the first two nights of Passover) that calls for placing an American flag on the *seder* (ritual and ceremonial dinner) table. Rabbi Levy’s ritual includes this remarkable liturgical reading:

*To us the United States of America stands as the foremost among nations, granting the greatest liberty to all who dwell here. Therefore we grace our table with the National flag. . . . The immortal Declaration of Independence is the Great Charter announced before Pharaoh by Moses. The Abolitionists are the product of the Bible . . . The Fourth of July is the American Passover. Thanksgiving is the American Feast of Tabernacles.*

*(Image courtesy of Rodef Shalom Congregation Archives.)*

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*Christopher Buck*

Introduction by  
*J. Gordon Melton*



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*for Nahzy Abadi Buck  
and our sons, Takur and Taraz*

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*I not only use all the brains I have, but all I can borrow, and I have borrowed a lot.*

—Woodrow Wilson (1914)<sup>1</sup>

Some extraordinary people helped make this book possible.

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## Endorsements

First, I wish to thank the following scholars for their respective endorsements of *Religious Myths and Visions of America*:



- Bruce E. Johansen, Frederick W. Kayser Professor, School of Communication, University of Nebraska at Omaha—author of *Forgotten Founders: Benjamin Franklin, the Iroquois, and the Rationale for the American Revolution* (1982) and (with Donald A. Grinde, Jr.) *Exemplar of Liberty: Native America and the Evolution of Democracy* (1991)—especially for his overall endorsement of my book:

*Religious Myths and Visions of America* is an intellectual feast, sparkling with original interpretations of how many religions have helped shape America's national character, from the Iroquois origin story, to Christian, Mormon, Black Muslim, and Baha'i beliefs, among others. This book will provoke insights and controversy for years to come.

- Todd Lawson, Emeritus Professor of Islamic Studies, Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto—author of *Gnostic Apocalypse in Islam: The Qur'an and the Bábí Movement* (2009) and *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (2009)—with special thanks for his positive evaluation of this book's methodological contribution:

An experiment on the 'idea of America' with engaging results, this book examines the role of ten religions in redefining America's world role—a topic of importance given America's influence in world affairs. On the premise that America is both 'nation and notion,' this project is a breath of methodological fresh air. *Religious Myths and Visions of America* is a novel, imaginative, and rigorously scholarly contribution to comparative religion, worthy of serious attention and debate. Of general contemporary and historical interest to students, scholars, and thinking people everywhere."

- William E. Paden, Professor of Religion, University of Vermont—author of *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (1988/1994), and *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion* (1992/2003)—notably for his comment on the timely relevance of the book:

Christopher Buck's new book is a timely and highly readable consideration of the way American religions have continued to remythologize the country. To this theme the author brings impressive research and notable facility in the comparative study of myth while at the same time presenting the material in an entirely accessible, lucid, and interesting manner. Few topics are more relevant today, in a time when the self-definition of Americans is such an influential force on the global stage.

- Jay Parini, D. E. Axinn Professor of English and Creative Writing, Middlebury College—author of *Promised Land: Thirteen Books That Changed America* (2008)—significantly for his insight that “America’s idea of itself” is “central to our national psyche” and is therefore a key issue in American studies:

In this remarkable book, Dr. Buck examines the key religious ideas that have shaped America’s idea of itself. It’s a broadly informed and beautifully written work that reveals the various strains in American mythology and religion. This country has always had a visionary aspect, a sense of the numinous; this impulse has taken many different forms. I can think of no subject in American studies more central to our national psyche. This is an important, interesting, thought-provoking work.

- Andrew Rippin, Emeritus Professor of History (Specialist in Islamic Studies with an interest in the Qur’an and the history of its interpretation), former Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Victoria, Canada—author of *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (2005), and editor of *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’an* (2006) and *The Islamic World* (2008)—for his welcome assessment:

This is an ambitious and unique work, covering a broad range of religious visions of America in their global context. Buck’s firm theoretical framework and rigorous documentation make this a significant contribution to contemporary discussions of the place, role, and future of the diversity of religions that make up America today.

- Richard W. Thomas, Emeritus Professor of History, Michigan State University—author of *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress* (1993) and *Understanding Interracial Unity: A Study of U.S. Race Relations* (1996)—for calling attention to the connections between religion and race in the American context:

For those of us who have yearned for a more readable and scholarly book on the multifaceted ways in which minorities, be they racial, cultural, or religious, have ‘redefined America’s world role,’ Christopher Buck’s most recent book is a welcome addition to the fields of racial, cultural, and ethnic studies. Using myths and visions of minority faiths, Buck has introduced an engaging and fresh new approach to understanding and appreciating the influence of these faiths on America’s role in the world. He does this by bringing these minority faiths from the periphery of scholarly discourse to the center of a new, more inclusive scholarly

discourse. Scholars have always known about the impact of race and ethnicity on religion throughout American history, but Buck's contribution is in the way that he explains the historical connections between race and religion and in the process of shaping America's role in the world. Above all, Buck keeps the reader engaged and intrigued in a study that reads like a good novel by a warm fire on a cold winter evening.

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Christopher Buck  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

## Notes

1. Woodrow Wilson, “Woodrow Wilson: The Man,” *Journal of Education* 79.16 (April 16, 1914): 427–428 [427].
2. Richard G. Kyle, Review of *Religious Myths and Visions of America*. *Journal of American History* 98.1 (June 2011): 279–280.

# Introduction

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Almost from the beginning of my many years of looking at the spectrum of religious groups that had been spawned in the United States over the last two centuries, I came face to face with churches that displayed their patriotism, often in seemingly inappropriate ways; preachers that denounced the evil that America had become; and still other groups that tried to consider in a serious and sophisticated manner the theological and cosmological significance of the country in which they resided and the meaning of being Americans. Such activity by groups brought me back to my own context as a young Methodist minister whose church's founders had felt compelled to add a statement on America in our Articles of Religion. As the church is being formally organized, which occurs on the heels of the American Revolution, they issued a formal statement of loyalty to the government of the new United States, part of a strategy of asserting loyalty by a group largely identified with the Tory cause during the years of fighting. As I took my initial seminary courses in Methodist history, I had to ask myself what it meant to make patriotic assertions amid the theological commitments to all the peoples of the world encompassed by God's grace. After all, I lived in a land not even known to exist by the biblical writers.

These beginning questions would lead fifty years later to a variety of observations about America and its place in the religious world. First, through the nineteenth century into the twentieth, America moved from a situation in which Christianity was the religion of a minority but nevertheless the dominant religion of the country (its only competition coming from a very small Jewish community and the steadily declining Native American religions) to one in which it is the majority religion by a large margin, but now faces competition from substantial communities of the world's religions from Hinduism and Buddhism to Islam and Western Esotericism. Not only is competition from the outside very real, but internally, the Christian community is divided into hundreds of denominations, some of which offer very distinctive visions of "True" Christianity—Christian Scientists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Latter-day Saints—visions different enough that Christian spokespersons single them

out with harsh labels like “heresy” and “cult.” Some would even be labeled “un-American” when, like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, they challenged American sacred symbols by refusing to salute the flag.

Because they emerged from the Revolution into a relatively secular nation, the nineteenth-century Christians felt they had to articulate their place and role in this new kind of country that had been created by such an unchristian activity as revolution. Through the first half of the century, they argued about condoning such an unbiblical act which appeared, for many, to go against Jesus words of rendering unto Caesar and the Apostle Paul’s admonition to be subject to the civil powers under which Christians found themselves. They had to find ways, on the one hand, to identify with ancient Israel in a context in which separation of church and state was an emerging reality, and, on the other hand, to find a new way to affirm the role of God in people’s lives. They would find their answers in the long-term success of their evangelistic endeavors which decade by decade brought members into the church well ahead of the rate of population growth, and in the vision of America as a unique land, an inheritor of biblical promises to Israel with a destiny to be a light to the world’s peoples and a key role in bringing into visible reality the kingdom of God.

That vision of America would have immense implications for all Americans. It would be integrated more or less self-consciously into Christian theology and become part of the Protestant Christian apologetic. It would become integrated into the all-important myth about race. It has undergirded the privileging those of Northern and Western European extraction—identified as the “real” Americans—and thus justify calling into question the Americanism of those of African, Asian, and Eastern European heritage. By the late twentieth century, it would force those adhering to other than Christian religions to add the task of thinking theologically about America to their list of “must dos” on their pilgrimage into the American mainstream. Occasionally, groups had to prioritize such ruminations as a simple survival mechanism when faced with attempts to deny them any future as American citizens, as was done to American Shintoists and Buddhists during World War II.

Secondly, while American religious history has been dominated by the Protestant Christian community, it became a widely diversified community. Starting with less than 20 denominations at its founding, by the end of the nineteenth century, some 300 Christian denominations had appeared, Judaism had begun its diversification, and a fledgling Esoteric community had emerged. Today more than a thousand Christian denominations dot the land, and easily many more groups, representatives of the world’s rich religious heritage, now fill out the religious landscape, not to mention the still relatively small but very vocal atheist/humanist groups. They present a massive scene upon which even the most dedicated observer can scarcely attempt to get a handle. And all of two thousand religious groups have an opinion on America.

Some, like the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Children of God of the 1970s, denounced America as a rotting, failing system that has no ultimate place in God's coming kingdom and called believers to abandon it. On the other end of the spectrum, groups found in America a portal for entering the kingdom, resulting in their developing a heightened sense of patriotism. The "I AM" religious movement, which emerged as World War II loomed on the horizon, saw their founder as a reincarnation of George Washington and have continued their commitment to a divinely ordained America in the decades since. Both extremes, with multiple positions in between, would find their place in the nineteenth century in the Anglo-Israel movement, one of the more unique theological attempts to justify initially British, but then American, global expansion by identifying the Anglo-Saxon nations as the present-day survivals of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Anglo-Israelism found its way into numerous different church communities, none more so than Adventism, where it would finally emerge as a key element in the theology of televangelist Herbert W. Armstrong who would distribute hundreds of thousands of copies of his *The United States and Britain in Prophecy* book.

Far from being an interesting additional topic for the religious dilettante, the discussion, around the theological reality that is America, periodically bursts forth as an important item on the nation's agenda, from the place of prayer services in the White House, to the issuance of an annual government report on religious persecution, to the rise of contemporary terrorism. As one traces radical Islam, for example, one arrives at the writings of one Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian who spent some of his younger years in America, and came away with his own vision of a country mired in sin and decadence. He would posit America as the image of everything he hoped to escape in promoting the agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Now, in all honesty, I must admit that over the years as I encountered all of the intriguing, even fascinating, ideas about America in the great cosmic scheme of things, I never got around to systematically gathering the different visions and trying to make sense of them in any detailed fashion. Thus, I have been more than happy to receive, and now with this modest introduction, pass along to my scholarly colleagues and the reading public the work of Christopher Buck. During his years of observation and research, he has surveyed the spectrum of visions of America that have energized and motivated the America's religious community, and has selected from among them a sample that both (1) represents the spectrum of opinion about America and its importance, and (2) highlights the more important visions of America that have shaped and are continuing to shape the way we understand this country we call home. His work calls us to become self-conscious about the assumptions we use in our day-to-day movements that massage the ways we approach our neighbors, our colleagues at work, and the politicians for whom we vote.

Buck begins with the visions of America present at the founding of the nation, aspects of which still strongly permeate the culture today, and have



found a new home among conservative Protestants in their innovative idea of a Christian America. Amid the Protestant context, we often forget the role of the Roman Catholic Church, which became the largest religious body in America in the 1840s and is now three times larger than its nearest competitor. At the end of the nineteenth century, a controversy on Americanism would erupt around Catholic visions of their place in a changing world that would drive it from participation in the nation's public square for a half-century, and molded its reentrance after World War II.

And then there are all the other-than-Christian religions, from Ahmad-iyya Muslims to Zoroastrians, all of which possess their own vision of America that shapes their appropriation of life in the United States and guides their development as their place in the nation was challenged, then accepted, and most recently affirmed and even celebrated by the nation as a whole. We have watched as Buddhists have carved out a place as cultural peacemakers, Muslims have struggled with separation of religion and government, and Baha'is have tried to understand the communication of their founder, Baha'u'llah, with the presidents of the Americas collectively, and with 'Abdu'l-Baha's statements about the destiny of America in particular. All of this occurs in the ebb and flow of religious life. One day we envision the possible unity of America's religions only to be thrown up against the many harsh divisions, which motivates us once more to seek realms of agreement, which again highlights the array of issues that can drive wedges between those who accept the label "American" as part of their self-identity.

In conclusion, I can, as a scholar, reflect on the contribution that this book, *God and Apple Pie: Religious Myths and Visions of America*, is making to our understanding of the American mosaic and how various segments of the religious community have found their way to being American. As an informed citizen I welcome its information that allows me to empathize with and make informed decisions relative to those with whom I might align (or oppose) as I sally forth in the public square. And on a personal level, I welcome the author's invitation for me to meet anew the residents of my neighborhood, those who shop in the same stores I do, send their children to the same schools my grandchildren attend, and diligently work toward their own appropriation of the American dream.

J. Gordon Melton  
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January 2015



Figure 1.1. The Civil War erupted on April 12, 1861 when Fort Sumter (Charleston Harbor, South Carolina) fell under Confederate artillery attack. Major Robert Anderson, garrison commander, surrendered the very next day. Soon after, on May 21, 1861, Currier & Ives, one of America's leading printmakers, copyrighted this lithograph of "The Spirit of 61," with the inscription, "God, our country and liberty!!"

Here, "Columbia," defiantly brandishing her sword and bearing the Union flag, is the spirit of America personified. Just as "Columbia" symbolizes America, so also can certain values—secular and religious—enshrine the very "idea of America."

(Public domain. Library of Congress. See <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003674564/>. Accessed January 12, 2015.)

## Chapter 1

# America: Nation and Notion

---

*Nations provoke fantasy.*

—Lauren Gail Berlant (1991)<sup>1</sup>

*America is not a geographic so much as a visionary concept and entity.*

—Kevin Lewis (1999)<sup>2</sup>

*Any vital myth does not hide in the hinterland of a “realm of ideas” but impinges upon the life of a people as a spring of their action. To give serious attention to the myth of American destiny in its various forms is to heed the concrete courses of action that are excited by it and that in turn affect it.*

—Conrad Cherry (1998)<sup>3</sup>

This book is about an unusual *religious* topic: the United States of America (“America”).

“America” is, at once, nation and notion, country and creed, republic and rhetoric, entity and ideology, sovereignty and salience. In other words, “America” is real and abstract. There are secular ideas about America, and then there are religious perspectives on America. Given America’s preeminent position in the world today, the present volume treats the relationship of the supernatural world to the world’s superpower. In fine, this book is about Providence and principle—as these relate to America.

The proverbial idea of “God and country”—as applied to America—is presented in a wide array of religious texts that are the subject of this study. The idea of America, as a religious concept, is an intriguing social phenomenon—one that has received considerable scholarly attention in terms of American Protestantism, but yet remains to be fully explored with respect to America’s other religions, which have been termed by James H. Moorhead as America’s “minority faiths.”<sup>4</sup> The study of how minority faiths have redefined America’s sense of national purpose is what *Religious Myths and Visions of America* is about.

The fact that America is presented in a somewhat novel way in this study is perhaps the main claim for the book's originality and contribution to American studies. Beyond presenting these religious views of America, an effort will be made to make sense of them. What significance, if any, do these religious ideas about America have for the twenty-first century? Patterns will be identified and compared. At a deeper level of analysis, meaningful connections will be made, and a web of significance will emerge. At the end of this book, the reader will see America in a new light.

As the epigraph above says, "Nations provoke fantasy." Myths and visions of various nations are nothing new. Throughout history, peoples have had visions of their origins, destiny, and mission, as Donald White points out: "For Romans, the worldview was a Pax Romana embodied in a divine Caesar; for Arabs, it was Islam; for Englishmen, it was the imperialism of the 'White Man's Burden'; for Soviet Russia, it was Marxist communism."<sup>5</sup> In much the same way, visionary "America" has served as a source of social cohesion and has imbued the country with a sense of national purpose. "America" is a word that has taken on mythic proportions.

"America" is not in the Bible, nor in the Qur'an (the holy book of Islam), nor in the vast majority of the scriptures of the great world religions. Yet "America" today pulsates with religious significance. How is that possible? This is because some religions, in the modern context, have invested America with religious significance. As a survey of religions that have attached some kind of spiritual meaning to America—that is, "a theology of America"—it is precisely this ideological and social phenomenon that has determined the selection process for which religions have been included with the scope of this study, to the exclusion of others.

Not every religion in America has a religious view of America. Such faith-communities as the Quakers, the Amish, the Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians, to name a few, have not been represented in this book. The reason is simple: most religions do not have identifiably religious convictions about America. Those that do have been included in this book. Eleven religions have been selected for their distinctive perspectives on America: (1) Native American religion (Iroquois); (2) Protestant Christianity (the Puritans); (3) the Christian Right; (4) Roman Catholicism; (5) Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist); (6) The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons); (7) Christian Identity (White nationalists); (8) the Nation of Islam (Black nationalists); (9) Contemporary Islam (especially Radical Islamists and Progressive Muslims); (10) Buddhism (Tibetan and Soka Gakkai); and (11) the Baha'i Faith. These eleven religions were not chosen because of *what* they say about America, but simply *because* they have something to say about America. If more such religions come to light, then a revised and expanded edition of *Religious Myths and Visions of America* may be called for. This book therefore invites serious reflection on what it means to be an American, particularly from a religious perspective.

The selection process, in the planning stages of this book, was not easy. The eleven religions privileged in this study neither have the same beliefs about America nor hold those beliefs with the same degree of religious conviction. American Judaism, for instance, exemplifies what is referred to as “Jewish Americanism” or what Jonathan D. Sarna calls the “cult of synthesis.”<sup>6</sup> Apart from various prayers for America, however, there is little by way of any Jewish doctrine regarding America. Where are actual religious doctrines regarding America to be found? Clearly, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons) and the Baha’i Faith have clearly enunciated beliefs about the spiritual destiny of America. Similarly, although parochially with some concession to the social fact of religious pluralism, the Christian Right seeks to promote Christian values consistent with America as a “Christian nation.” What most, but not all of these eleven religions do share is a sense of America’s mission—or the “world role” to which America should aspire.

To recapitulate, the single most important criterion for the selection of a religion for inclusion in this study is that it must have something to say about America, whether positive or negative. One would think that this would include all of the religions that have specifically American origins. In the case of the Seventh-day Adventists, which is one of the most successful of America’s indigenous religions, a conscious effort has been made by Adventists to distance the religion from any hint of American religious nationalism: “In Adventism, the American dream is reinterpreted; in Mormonism, Christianity is reinterpreted. Adventists have become un-American in an effort to be more truly American.”<sup>7</sup> The result was a decidedly dark apocalyptic vision of America—a vision that, theoretically speaking, is germane and otherwise within the scope of this book. For instance, one Adventist, in 1851, interpreted the “two horns like a lamb”—a description of the Beast in Revelation 13—as denoting “the civil and religious power of this nation [America]—its Republican civil power, and its Protestant ecclesiastical power.”<sup>8</sup> American religious power was viewed as corrupt for having instituted Sunday rather than Saturday Sabbath, which is a central issue considering the Sabbatarianism that has indelibly stamped Adventist identity.

Very late in the writing of the first edition of *God & Apple Pie*, the author came across this dissertation: Dawn L. Hutchinson, “Antiquity and Social Reform: Religious Experience in the Unification Church, Feminist Wicca and the Nation of Yahweh” (2007).<sup>9</sup> But it was really far too late to include these religions in the present volume. Therefore, a very brief mention will be made here of their respective visions of America. “The Unification Church,” Hutchinson relates, “offered a way to purify the morally corrupt American society and the rest of the world through perfected families.”<sup>10</sup> The Unification Church’s vision of America was most optimistic in 1976, when America was celebrating the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence: “[Rev. Sun Myung] Moon saw the celebration of the bicentennial of America as an opportunity to stress the providential destiny of America.”<sup>11</sup>

“Feminist Wicca,” Hutchinson continues, “proposed a vision of a peaceful American society in which women and men shared power equally.”<sup>12</sup> “The Nation of Yahweh,” says the author regarding this separatist religion, “meant . . . to wage a war against the white establishment in the United States, one action at a time, dismantling the power structure of the persecutors of African-Americans.”<sup>13</sup>

In *Myths America Lives By*, Richard T. Hughes, Distinguished Professor of Religion and the Director of the Center for Faith and Learning at Pepperdine University, presents five foundational myths of America: (1) the Myth of the Chosen Nation; (2) the Myth of Nature’s Nation; (3) the Myth of the Christian Nation; (4) the Myth of the Millennial Nation, and (5) the Myth of the Innocent Nation.<sup>14</sup> These are powerful social myths that have largely shaped mainstream American identity. Moreover, these five myths are predominantly representative of what may be called the Protestant master myth of America. Indeed, both Hughes himself and the writer of the foreword, Robert Bellah, write from a decidedly Christian perspective: “Richard Hughes writes as a Christian and so do I.”<sup>15</sup> These foundational myths form what is called American civil religion, which may be defined as follows:

American civil religion is an institutionalized set of beliefs about the nation, including a faith in a transcendent deity who will protect and guide the United States as long as its people and government abide by his laws. The virtues of liberty, justice, charity, and personal integrity are all pillars of this religion and lend a moral dimension to its public decision-making processes quite different from the realpolitik that presumably underlies the calculations of states not equally favored by divine providence. American civil religion is clearly an offshoot of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but it is not confined to conventional denominational categories.<sup>16</sup>

While *Myths America Lives By* is a framing statement about American civil religion, the present volume treats a wider array of myths of America. The Native American, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, Christian Identity, Black Muslim, traditional Muslim, Buddhist, and Baha’i religions each has its own special metaphors (ideating images) of “the American experiment.” These are communicated through religious *myths* and *visions* of America.

At the outset, it is important to define what is meant by religious “myths” by defining what myths are *not*. For our purposes, myths are not merely “tall tales” or travesties of truth. Rather, religious myths are tapestries into which the woof of social truths are woven into the warp of sacred narrative. In other words, religious myths are spiritual and social ideals are enshrined in narrative form. A religious myth, if not literally true, can therefore be called a “true lie.” This is because the function of storytelling

is not to rehearse *historical fact*, but to convey *spiritual truth*. Just as Aesop's fables each had a "moral" to the story, religious myths are vehicles of moral values. This accords with Peter D. Salins's definition: "Myths are not mere fantasies or untruths. Myths are exaggerated or simplified representations of human traits and situations, paradigms of society and morality, that are based on some underlying truth."<sup>17</sup> Put more positively, myths "function as paradigmatic truths, informing social norms and categories used to describe identities."<sup>18</sup>

The "myth of America" exists in a variety of forms. Closely associated with the "myth of America" is a sense of national purpose, or "mission." Historically, the dominant myth of America has been the Protestant "master myth" of America. For instance, there were two biblical motifs that formed the historic taproot of America's sense of destiny: America's identification with ancient Israel and the Kingdom of God.<sup>19</sup> Beginning with the Puritans, the Protestant mission in America was to *colonize*, to *Christianize*, and to *civilize*. The Puritans have vanished, but vestiges of the religious meaning that they invested in America persist to this day. These religious visions of America, and the ideals that they enshrine, are part of a process that may be thought of as *the symbolic construction of America*. The idea of America has been summed up in this succinct statement:

America's sense of itself always had a self-conscious, even ideological, side. First, the United States, founded by a rebellion against legitimate authority, had to explain and justify that rebellion to mankind. Then, the growing nation had to justify taking over a continent from its previous owners. Finally, it had to persuade the immigrants arriving on that continent that, in assimilating to the American nation, they were not being false to themselves, that Americanism was in some sense a universal creed to which all could be admitted.<sup>20</sup>

Common to most of these religious visions of America is some sort of belief in "God and country." Any belief that links God with America can rightly be called a "theology of America." Dean Hoge was the first to coin the neologism, "theology of America."<sup>21</sup> And so a religiously inspired perspective on America is typically a "theology of America," although this would certainly not hold true for a nontheistic religion like Buddhism. Thus, except for nontheistic religions such as Buddhism, religious views of America may generally be described as "theologies of America," as Hoge explains: "Any living religious community has theological views about many things, and these things include the nation. In America such views might be called 'theology of America'."<sup>22</sup>

Obviously, there is no single religious idea or "theology of America." Just as there are different religions in America, so there are sundry religious visions of America. By presenting a range of religious perspectives on America, this book invites serious reflection on what it means to be

an American. However, it is not enough merely to catalog these views on America. It is important to make sense of them as well. And in order to make sense of competing ideas about America, one may ask if these ideas reflect any *patterns*. If so, can these patterns be explained? This is where comparative method generally comes into play. This is a challenge since there is no well-defined “method” to follow, as Americanist Donald White points out: “The study of social myth has lacked coherent method.”<sup>23</sup> Notwithstanding, the lack of consensus on method should not deter such a study from being undertaken. Often, the topic under study—and the questions that interrogate it—suggest an approach and method that intrinsically arise out of the very subject matter itself. That is the case in the present study.

In a word, America was founded on religious ideals and continues to be reshaped by them. The reader will discover that some of today’s minority religions offer fresh ideas about America that enrich our understanding of the significance of America today, particularly as regards its place in the world today. To the extent that the minority faiths, as presented in this study, offer new ideas regarding America, one can say that *religions re-mythologize America*. In order to appreciate this concept of re-mythologizing, it will be necessary to relate minority religious visions of America to the Protestant “master myth” of America.

## Civil Myths of America and Civil Religion

The *notion* of a nation is *nationalism*. American nationalism is an idealization of the character of America. The “idea of America”—to use academic parlance—has taken on mythic proportions. America has a national mythology, anchored in history but embellished by idealization. That mythic idealization has played a formative and sustaining role in “the construction of American nationhood.”<sup>24</sup> Just as the American national character changes over time, as a function of social change, so do America’s myths and symbols. Thus the late Canadian Americanist Sacvan Bercovitch wrote of “transformations in the symbolic construction of America.”<sup>25</sup>

Nationalism and religion often combine to form religious nationalism, which typically takes on mythic proportions. “Religious nationalism is the fusion of nationalism and religion such that they are inseparable,” according to Barbara-Ann J. Rieffer.<sup>26</sup> “It is a community of religious people or the political movement of a group of people heavily influenced by religious beliefs who aspire to be politically self-determining.”<sup>27</sup> Religious nationalism can make great use of myth. “Myth is the primary language of historical memory,” writes Richard Slotkin, “a body of traditional stories that have, over time, been used to summarize the course of our collective history and to assign ideological meanings to that history.”<sup>28</sup> Political theorist George Schöpflin treats myths as an element in the formation and maintenance of



national identities, America being no exception. National myths function on both personal and social levels, according to Schöpflin, “so that individuals may construct their identities as individuals and simultaneously as members of a community.”<sup>29</sup>

Nationalism incorporates myth.<sup>30</sup> Just as nationalism is an invented doctrine, so are myths. Myths are “true lies.” The “lies” are the tall tales that myths tell, while mythic “truths” are the social precepts these tales convey. In other words, myths are fictions that serve as vehicles of truth. From this perspective, Mary Fulbrook states that “myths are stories which are not necessarily true, nor even believed to be true, but which have symbolic power.”<sup>31</sup> Anthony D. Smith states that, “Modern nationalism can be seen in part as deriving from powerful, external, and premodern traditions, symbols, and myths, which are then taken up and recast in the nationalist ideologies of national mission and destiny as these emerge in the crucible of modernization”; Smith even speaks of “a symbiosis and even a fusion between the earlier religious myths and the nationalist ideal.”<sup>32</sup> That symbolic power reinforces national ideology and thus national identity. As mythographer William Doty states: “Myths provide ‘charters’ insofar as they justify and exemplify the social order.”<sup>33</sup> Myths capture social truths. While those truths are not the whole truth, they are the truths of a whole people.

Civil myths of America often have a religious dimension, reflecting a fusion of “God and country.” Their hybridization has been noted by Anthony D. Smith.<sup>34</sup> Smith argues that nationalism “draws much of its passion, conviction and intensity from the belief in a national mission and destiny; and this belief in turn owes much to a powerful religious myth of ethnic election.”<sup>35</sup> America, broadly speaking, has its myths of origin, myths of mission, and myths of destiny—the “master myth” being the collective Protestant myth of America, most famously secularized as American exceptionalism.<sup>36</sup> Thus one can speak of religious visions of America as a species of national myth. Traditionally, Protestant myths of America have served as the stained-glass windows of national ideals. They form a master myth of American destiny.<sup>37</sup> Protestant visions of America are a hybrid of religious and national myth, combining to form what has been termed “American civil religion.”<sup>38</sup>

Sociologist Dean Hoge has outlined three basic civil visions of America, the first two of which originate in American Protestantism. The first vision of America is that of a model nation, a Puritan vision that “focused on making America an example to the world, a model society to show all the world what a godly and free nation can be.”<sup>39</sup> The second vision “saw America as a chosen people with an obligation to work actively in the world to win others to American principles and to safeguard those principles everywhere.”<sup>40</sup> Although weak at first, this vision was the direct precursor of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny: “It was clearly stated in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny,

that America's destiny was to settle the whole continent—and later, to bring freedom and civilization to all peoples."<sup>41</sup> Hoge also notes that this "activistic vision" of America "was a motivating source of the world Christian mission movement and of American expansionism in the late nineteenth century" in that "America would save the world for Christ or for democracy."<sup>42</sup> "A third vision of America's mission," Hoge goes on to say, "calls for internationalism based not on messianic ideas but on a posture of openness and cooperation, assuming that others have legitimate interests and identities and equally valid perceptions of truth."<sup>43</sup> Hoge connects this third ideal with Robert Bellah's ideal of a "world civil religion"<sup>44</sup>—a concept that the present writer will expand on in the "Conclusion" (Chapter 13). Examples of each of these three basic types of religious and civil visions of America appear throughout this book.

## Religious Myths and Visions of America

Sociofunctionalism recognizes the fact that myths convey social and moral values. In the same vein, one may define a "religious myth of America" as an "*idealized narrative exemplifying key precepts and practices.*" This is true insofar as the myth incorporates and conveys social values in an effective way. When a story is told, a truth is told. A narrative that is *descriptive in form* may be *prescriptive in function*.

America's national myth has Puritan origins, and religion has helped shape American identity ever since. A prime example is the doctrine of Manifest Destiny (the right of America to *colonize, Christianize, and civilize* the continent of North America). Nearly every American student learns of "Manifest Destiny"<sup>45</sup>—the American imperial myth. Manifest Destiny is the doctrine that Euro-Americans had a God-given right to conquer and colonize North America, and eventually to civilize and imperialize Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. Manifest Destiny is a salient theme in American history that runs through the Indian Wars, the Mexican-American War, the Spanish-American War, the wars across the Arc of Rimland Asia, and beyond.

The present study treats religious myths and religious visions as complementary categories. The two typically go together. There is certainly overlap between religious myths and religious visions of America. Such myths, as previously said, are *descriptive in form* yet may be *prescriptive in function*. These myths are *thought-orienting*, whereas visions of America are typically *action-orienting*. That is to say, such myths and visions are *prescriptive in function*.

The Protestant myth of America—which has long reigned as America's master myth—is arguably being reshaped by religious visions of America held by minority faiths, as historian James Moorhead has suggested: "But

the point is that minority faiths themselves played no small part in the weakening of white Protestant hegemony. Their creativity in adapting and reinterpreting the symbols of American destiny broadened the framework of discourse within which citizens explained national identity."<sup>46</sup> While the religious "master myth" of America is Protestant, this myth is being improvised upon by alternative myths of America held by religious minorities, who have altered America's religious landscape, and by Protestants themselves. The question is *how*? How have minority religions dealt with the Protestant myth of America? First, according to Moorhead, minority faiths strove to understand the meaning of America and their place in it. Second, minority faiths could turn ideas originally derived from Protestantism to their own uses. Third, minority religions and the Protestant mainstream engaged in a complex pattern of contests and negotiations as together they redefined American identity. Minority religious visions of America have thus broadened—and continue to reshape—American identity.

A study in the new religious dimensions of American identity is one whose time has come. The myths and visions of America, as held by minority faiths covered in this volume, are productive of a view of America that is essentially reactive to the Protestant mything of America. These competing myths of America have been as undertheorized as they have been inadequately surveyed and compared.

## Racial Myths and Visions of America

Perhaps the most salient theme among these minority myths of America is that of race. Indeed, the theme of race stands out as a defining feature of these visions and myths. In a sense, this was already predicted by David Wills, who has suggested that the "central themes" of American religious history are pluralism, Puritanism, and the encounter of black and white.<sup>47</sup> According to Paul Harvey, Christianity was a major catalyst in racializing America: "Christianity necessarily was central to the process of *racializing* peoples—imposing categories of racial hierarchies upon groups of humanity or other societies."<sup>48</sup> One may say that religions in America have dealt with racial categories in various ways. This is really a modern phenomenon, and one that is refracted in various religious communities as an epiphenomenon of the whole notion of "race." For purely illustrative purposes, while disclaiming any attempt to essentialize religions, certain patterns with respect to American religions and race begin to fall into focus once their respective visions of America are studied and then compared. On comparative grounds, therefore, one may venture the following "operative hypotheses," to be elucidated, tested, and refined throughout the course of this book.

Tentatively, one may say that Protestant Christianity had set a racial agenda during the colonial period. At the risk of oversimplifying, American Protestantism—by rationalizing and institutionalizing slavery in the South, and by formulating opposing rationale in the North—set the stage for racial ideologies that had social consequences of world-historical proportions. To this history and its persisting legacy, minority faiths have tended to “react” to the problem of race in their own ways. As for the minority faiths surveyed in this book, the Nation of Islam has idiosyncratically racialized America by mythologizing Blacks as “original” and thus superior. Equally as idiosyncratically as well as invidiously, Christian Identity has racialized America by mythologizing Whites as racially “pure” and thus superior. The Mormons have racialized America by mythologizing Native Americans as transplanted Whites, but since darkened, and Blacks as once cursed, but now eligible for priesthood (males). However, since 1978, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has now adopted a much more egalitarian stance. And the Baha’i Faith has reacted to a racialized America by representing race as America’s most challenging issue, the solution to which is to harmonize the races and thus ultimately deracialize America.

The process of racializing and redefining race affords a prime example of a conscious flux in American identity and religious thought over time. Although not useful as a biological category, race has operated (and still operates) as a central determinant of social identity, in which the social world is literally seen in terms of black and white. America is not yet post-racial. The national mirror is slow to reflect social transformations, until the population is awash with a sea change in its demographics. Yet the country is now experiencing a profound transition, in which national identity has to “catch up” with its reconfigured multicultural and religiously plural social reality, both here at home and across the world. It will take time to erase race as an essentialist social construct, reared on the shaky foundations of superficial racial characteristics, such as skin color, in which biological difference is a figment (i.e. a pigment) of the imagination. Egalitarianism continues to act as an equalizing force, and religions are increasingly playing a role in overcoming the problems that historically resulted from the influence of racial doctrines, as religiously rationalized.

An operative thesis may be ventured in the chapters to follow: Over the course of American history, religious myths and visions of America tend to reflect an ever-changing American civil society, whether as a *function* of its social evolution or as a *catalyst* of it. That is to say, in the survey of religions undertaken in this book, the following operative hypothesis may be tested: *Religions re-mythologize America*. And further: *Religions re-envision America*.



Figure 1.2. John Gast’s “American Progress” (1872)—published as the frontispiece in *Croftt’s Trans-Continental Tourist Guide* in 1874—iconically captures the spirit of “Manifest Destiny.” (See Chapter 3 below.) Oil-on-canvas original at the Autry National Center, Los Angeles. “This picture was the design of the publisher,” George Croftt boasted, adding this pitch:

*Is there a home, from the miner’s humble cabin to the stately marble mansion of the capitalist, that can afford to be without this GREAT National picture, which illustrates in the most artistic manner all the gigantic results of American brains and hands? Who would not have such a beautiful token to remind them of our country’s grandeur and enterprise, which have caused the mighty wilderness to blossom like the rose!*

(Public domain. Library of Congress. <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97507547/>. Accessed January 12, 2015.)

## Chapter 1 Update: Reviews and Revisions

*Religious Myths and Visions of America* has many strengths. The author has defended his thesis with solid research. He has also made an original contribution to American studies.

— Richard G. Kyle  
Tabor College (2011)

*This book, therefore, is not simply an analysis of ten different myths and visions of America but also provides an ideological map that accounts for faith-based understandings and actions in relation to the American presence globally. In this sense, this volume may be of interest to readers involved not only in Religious Studies, but also in Political Science, History, Intellectual History, American Studies, and Cultural Studies.*

— Irén E. Annus,  
University of Szeged, Hungary (2012)<sup>50</sup>

Time to add a new chapter—on the “Christian Right”—and to update the existing ones.

Since 2009, when this book was first published, the reviews have been mostly positive. Two reviews stand out—I suppose because the reviewers considered *Religious Myths and Visions of America* to be outstanding. So, while admittedly self-serving, the first review that I would like to cite is by Irén E. Annus, an Americanist at the University of Szeged, Hungary:

This book, therefore, is not simply an analysis of ten different myths and visions of America but also provides an ideological map that accounts for faith-based understandings and actions in relation to the American presence globally. In this sense, this volume may be of interest to readers involved not only in Religious Studies, but also in Political Science, History, Intellectual History, American Studies, and Cultural Studies. . . . In the course of the detailed and well-documented analysis of individual religions, Buck reveals a highly elaborate and in-depth picture of the various beliefs, which is indeed impressive.<sup>51</sup>

Even highly positive book reviews come with a criticism. (Academic journals, as a rule, typically require their reviewers include critical comments—the bad as well as the good—for the purposes of honest appraisal for a well-balanced and, therefore, a credible book review.) Professor Annus goes on to express one important reservation about *Religious Myths and Visions of America*:

He argues that the original myth and vision of America as a nation was captured by the Protestant notion of manifest destiny. This has been challenged by the other faiths he examines “as responses to the challenges with pluralism and race, in which minority faiths—America’s alternative religions—implicitly seek to transcend the legacy of Puritanism in shaping America’s self-image” (221–22). It is these alternative understandings, he reasons, that have transformed the idea of manifest destiny into America’s common destiny, an idea which, however appealing it may sound,

is not entirely convincing. Nevertheless, the book is overall a fresh and stimulating cultural reading of some of America's religions and the complex ways in which their followers make sense of and act in the world.<sup>52</sup>

What Professor Annus found to be "not entirely convincing" is the thesis captured in the book's subtitle: *How Minority Faiths Redefined America's World Role*. I agree that that subtitle is overly ambitious, and therefore overstated. To be fair, it is true that the minority religions surveyed in this book have, in a certain sense, each offered a fresh perspective on America's role in the world today. To the extent that each and every such minority religious vision of America clearly represents a departure from the Protestant "master of myth" of America (harking back to the Puritans), then it is fair to say that each alternative perspective on America, practically by definition, is intrinsically a redefinition of America's perceived place among the nations. What this subtitle does is to somewhat sensationalize this very fact by implying that the minority faiths have redefined America's world rule extrinsically. Yet, I must admit, there is no clear evidence of any such direct influence.

And so, without Professor Annus having gone so far as to make an explicit recommendation, I have decided to change the title to *God & Apple Pie*. The original subtitle was not my first choice, anyway. Truth be told, it was the marketing guru at ABC-CLIO who rejected *God & Apple Pie* and recommended *How Minority Faiths Redefined America's World Role*, from among several others that I had proposed.

So now you know the rest of the story. The choice of the original subtitle was a marketing decision. Of course, I completed the manuscript with that "thesis" in mind. I took the "ball" (i.e. ABC-CLIO's recommended subtitle) and ran with it.

Now, forewarned and forearmed by these prefatory remarks, I hope that the reader will understand and appreciate what I mean by such terms as "redefine," "remythologize," "re-envision," etc. I certainly hope that the new title, *God & Apple Pie*, will not only be less problematic (if problematic at all), but will prove advantageous for marketing purposes. After all, the point of writing a book is to have it read. If it sells well, all the better!

The other highly positive review came with a recommendation, which has also been accepted and implemented in this revised edition of *Religious Myths and Visions of America*. The reviewer is Richard G. Kyle, professor emeritus of Tabor College. He writes:

*Religious Myths and Visions of America* has many strengths. The author has defended his thesis with solid research. He has also made an original contribution to American studies. Even so, I have two criticisms. The first relates to style. Buck resorts to quote after quote and most are lengthy and off-set. This hinders the readability of the book. The second criticism pertains to substance. The author correctly notes the Puritan impact on

the Protestant view of America, namely, setting the tone. He also rightly mentions the influence of civil religion. However, he limits the impact largely to mainline Protestantism. Currently, the greatest influence of Puritanism may be on evangelical Protestantism, especially the Religious Right. Evangelicals evidence a conflicting view of America. On one hand, they push American “exceptionalism” and have “sacralized” many aspects of American culture (for example, its political and economic systems). On the other hand, they lament the loss of “Christian America” largely because of the nation’s permissive attitude toward sexual openness, homosexuality, and abortion.<sup>53</sup>

Judging from the fact that I have quoted Richard Kyle at length, it’s obvious that I am not about to dispense with my practice of offsetting block quotes. Even if doing so is a little bit off-putting to some readers, I continue to do so particularly when I feel that it is important to privilege the text by quoting it intact. Professor Kyle’s second criticism, however, is one that I have taken to heart, by adding a new chapter, “The Christian Right’s Myths and Visions of America.” It’s a short chapter, but an important one.

Now, in the interest of full disclosure, there was one negative review:

In truth there can be no real analysis of the actual influence of these minority myths, because there is no theoretical framework for it and nowhere to place evidence for such influence. Some form of discourse analysis might have provided a useful way of gauging influences, or at least a means of analysing the interactions of myths.<sup>54</sup>

Here, the reviewer suggests no concrete method except for “some form of discourse analysis.” Some readers may ask: “What, in God’s name, is ‘discourse analysis’?” That’s a fair question. The simplest answer I can give is this:

Discourse analysis looks at not only what speakers say in conversation, but what they do. In studying the underlying dynamics behind the messages that are being conveyed, analysts are looking “beyond the sentence,” as it were. Using a theatrical performance as an analogy, discourse analysis would then involve not only what is going on backstage, but how the audience is reacting as well.

“Discourse analysis” is a buzzword. The use of the term, “discourse analysis,” practically requires its own discourse analysis. This is because it is such a wide-ranging field. It is more multidisciplinary than it is cross-disciplinary. Without going into detail, suffice it to say that discourse analysis involves “frames,” “floors,” “discourse markers,” “sequence,” “social practice,” “schema,” “script,” “contextualization inferences and cues,” “initiation,” “intonation,” “response,” “micro-pause,” “elicitation,” “turn-taking system,” “face work,” “interpersonal distance,” “transition relevant place,” “imposition,” “implicature,” “preference organization,” “adjacency pair system,”



“agonistic verbal interaction,” “ritual adversativeness,” “discourse strategies,” “frame theory,” “micro-construction,” “dynamic speech act theory,” “conversation analysis,” “collocation analysis,” “ethnomethodology,” “knowledge structures,” “interaction theory,” “politeness theory,” “locutionary act,” “illocutionary act,” “perlocutionary act,” “power relations” (particularly important in critical discourse analysis), and so forth.

You get the picture. Critical discourse analysis is long and involved. It’s complicated. But it’s quite useful. However, such close analysis is outside the scope of this book, which is written for a popular, educated audience as well as for academics and university students.

The reviewer does not identify which discipline, nor which method, he would recommend. Therefore, this criticism is not really that constructive. A somewhat empty criticism, it is more of a broadside—a scathing philippic that, while serious and perhaps well intended, misses its target completely for lack of ammunition. Critical discourse analysis is so vast and diverse that to attempt to apply any particular method to the religious texts surveyed in this book would be to swallow the subject matter by the very method itself, if a suitable one could be found.

The term, “critical discourse,” is dynamic and continues to transform with use. So I will not adopt a formal theoretical frame of discourse analysis, because what’s important is to first “map the territory” by locating and identifying the relevant discourses themselves—the key narratives—by way of the survey of those minority faiths that have had something significant to say about America, whether officially or popularly. Here, as previously mentioned, we’re not talking about individuals within faith-communities who made significant statements, except insofar as any of these individuals have represented what may be considered *expressive of a collective worldview* as it relates to America itself.

These are the discourses of interest. Loosely speaking, the methodology adopted in the present book is a *historical-diachronic* analysis, comparing how America, as “nation and notion,” changes over time. As an analytic approach, a more formal comparative method (i.e., comparative discourse analysis) may well be adopted in the future, provided there is a sufficient interest in the discourses themselves, in the present. But, for now, let us proceed to map, locate, and identify narratives that operate as discourses on the idea of America, from the perspectives of “minority faiths” in relation to the Protestant “master myth” of America.

After this lengthy introduction, the reader is now about to embark on an adventure into the religious landscape of America, with special attention given to those religions that have official or popular collective beliefs about America. These perspectives on America’s role in the world—and its purpose and place in the world today—invite serious reflection on what it means to be an American, and give pause for thought on how America can make a spiritual difference in the world today, beyond its obvious political power, economic influence, and military might. The “idea of America” is

both secular and religious, synthesizing to produce a “civil religion” that evolves over time.

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Figure 2.1. Authorized by the Native American \$1 Coin Act (Public Law 110-82), the United States Mint issued its “2010 Native American \$1 Coin,” commemorating the Iroquois “Government—The Great Tree of Peace.” The reverse design features an image of the wampum “Hiawatha Belt” around five arrows bound together. Inscriptions: “Haudenosaunee” and “Great Law of Peace.” From the official U.S. Mint description:

*The Haudenosaunee Confederation, also known as the Iroquois Confederacy of upstate New York, was remarkable for being founded by 2 historic figures, the Peacemaker and his Onondaga spokesman, Hiawatha, who spent years preaching the need for a league.*  
(Public domain. Image of currency.)

## Chapter 2

# Native American Myths and Visions of America

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*A voluntary Union entered into by the Colonies themselves, I think, would be preferable to one impos'd by [the British] Parliament. . . . It would be a very strange Thing, if Six Nations [the Iroquois Confederacy] of ignorant Savages should be capable of forming a Scheme for such an Union [of the American colonies], and be able to execute it in such a Manner, as that it has subsisted Ages, and appears indissoluble; and yet that a like Union should be impracticable for ten or a Dozen English Colonies, to whom it is more necessary, and must be more advantageous; and who cannot be supposed to want an equal Understanding of their Interests.*

—Benjamin Franklin (1750)<sup>1</sup>

**B**enjamin Franklin was right: the Iroquois Confederacy was a worthy model for America.

Franklin refers to the “Six Nations,” the most well-known New World democracy prior to European “contact.” The Six Nations was a consensus-based system of governance, and therefore democratic. The founding nations were five: Oneidas, Mohawks, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas. Later, between 1710 and 1735, the Tuscaroras joined as the sixth full nation of the league. In Benjamin Franklin’s day, the confederacy was known (and is still known today) as the “Six Nations.” More were adopted into the league as incorporated nations, according to Barbara Mann: the Andastes (the Conestogas), the Conoys (Piscataways), the Delawares (Lenni Lenapes), the Eries (the Long-tailed Cat (or Lynx) Nation), the Honniasonts, the Kah-Kwahs, the Mahicans, the Munsees, the Nanticokes, the Neutrals (Wyandots of Canada, miscalled “Hurons” by the French), the Saponis, the Squawkihaws, the Susquehannocks, the Tutelos, the Wappingers, the Wenros (or Wenronhronons), the Wyandots (or Ywendats), and the Wyomings.<sup>2</sup>

The original “Five Nations” alliance was established by Deganawida (a.k.a. the “Peacemaker”). Whether this happened during the eclipse of

1142 or 1451<sup>3</sup> will be discussed further in this chapter. The Peacemaker was assisted by Hiawatha and Jigonsaseh (a.k.a. the “Mother of Nations” and the “Peace Queen”).<sup>4</sup> The traditions surrounding the diplomacy and statesmanship of this “Peace Trio” (Deganawida, Hiawatha and Jigonsaseh) are legendary—literally. In other words, just as the Iroquois Confederacy was historical, so were its founders.

Among the other “firsts” attributable to Native Americans were the first visions of America—long before this land was called “America.” Among the Iroquois (or Haudenosaunee),<sup>5</sup> America, prior to European contact, was known as “Turtle’s Back” or “Turtle Island.” According to the Iroquois origin story, the world took shape on a gigantic turtle’s back, when a great Snapping Turtle offered his carapace, bearing the Earth above water, as he swam. The Haudenosaunee myths, legends and visions of America are as representative of Native American and Native Canadian worldviews as they are preeminent. They are also arguably foundational, in the sense that Iroquois civilization gave rise to a New World democracy that evidently influenced the formation of the United States of America.

## **The Turtle Island Myth and the Myth of “Mother Earth”**

Before America became “America,” one of the original names for North America was “Turtle Island.” Originally, “Turtle Island” probably designated the region of the Northeast United States and contiguous territories in nearby Canada, and later came to represent all of North America. While the geographical reference is real, the name itself, “Turtle Island,” is mythical. Today, the myth of Turtle Island is universally familiar to all Native Americans.

“Turtle Island” is an Edenic narrative about the origin of a sacred land, whether part or all of North America. A standard Eastern Woodland creation myth, the story of Turtle Island is the Iroquois’ foundation myth. It is “history” in the form of a “story.” It is a Haudenosaunee origin story—and perhaps the original religious myth of America. It has been a widespread myth practically from its inception. Historically, the basic elements of this myth are common to the Iroquois and Algonquin Nations of the Northeast, among others, such as the Tuskegee and Blackfoot, as well as the Inuit and the Athabascans of the Arctic and the Far North.

The Turtle Island myth is a variation of what anthropologists have termed “the Earth Diver Creation” myth, found throughout the eastern region of North America and even in California. The story of the Earth Diver is a common theme in North American Indian creation mythology, in which land is first formed from a mere handful of mud taken from the ocean floor by a heroic animal spirit that must dive to great depths for it. After the animal spirit succeeds in extracting this mud from the sea bed, the sediment itself is transformed into an island—land that emerges from the primordial



deep. In an article that is now considered a classic, Gladys A. Reichard has provided an analysis and a study of the diffusion and distribution of the Earth Diver myth. She cites documented versions of this myth from the ethnographies of a considerable range of Indian nations.<sup>6</sup>

Of all of these variations on the same basic myth, the Iroquois myth of Turtle Island itself exists in some 25 versions. These disparate traditions, harmonious in their core essentials, are authoritatively described by Barbara Mann.<sup>7</sup> These versions, notwithstanding their variants, share a core of nine essential elements: (1) Sky Woman, who dwells in the Sky World, becomes pregnant; (2) the Tree of Light, the *axis mundi* of the Sky World is uprooted; (3) Sky Woman falls through the gaping hole left by the uprooted “Tooth” tree, plummets through the vasty space, and lands on the back of a giant Tortoise, swimming atop the primal sea, her fall cushioned by birds; (4) after taking council, the animal spirits dive to wrest mud from the ocean floor, and the precious sediment is brought to the surface; (5) this generative soil is then transplanted on Turtle’s back, and burgeons into a vast island; (6) Sky Woman’s daughter begets Twins, the older Sapling (born before his twin brother) and younger Flint (who kills his mother in parturition); (7) as an Iroquois culture hero, Sapling liberates animals pent up by Flint and then secures corn; (8) Sapling and jealous Flint engage in a cosmic duel, an archetypal battle fought with deadly weapons—rushes or maize versus flint or antler; and, finally (9) Sapling vanquishes Flint, who is banished, while Sky Woman and Sapling return to the Sky World, promising to return on the last day of the world.<sup>8</sup> The first five elements of the core narrative may be summarized in more detail as follows.

(1) *The Sky World*: The original forebears of the Iroquois were the sky People. They dwelled in *Karionake*, “The Place in the Sky,” otherwise known as the Sky World. The Sky World was a physical place that floated among the stars. The Sky World was the celestial prototype of Iroquoia, with the same geography. The familiar flora and fauna had their spiritual counterparts in the Sky World. There is a good reason for this: “The bedrock assumption of eastern cultures is that everything that exists, exists by halves. The cosmos is seen as naturally dividing into its two, complementary parts—Sky and Earth—which interact for harmony.”<sup>9</sup> As above, so below.

There may be another principle at work in this myth as well. Consider the fact that the social order of the Sky World greatly resembled later Iroquois society.<sup>10</sup> Here, one clearly sees *cosmogony as sociogony*—that is, the Iroquois creation cycle is not so much an account of the creation of the physical world as it is an account of the establishment of Iroquois society, of its folkways and social mores. This essential function of Iroquois myth is noted by William Nelson Fenton: “The great cosmological myth spells out the duties that each was assigned to perform for the benefit of humankind; it tells how the first human beings on earth learned to adjust to the situation as they found it, and how they responded to crises later on.”<sup>11</sup> Fenton’s insight here is specific to the myth itself; it is not generalized to all myth.

But, on comparative grounds, the function of cosmogony as sociogony can be seen as fairly universal. In other words, accounts of the creation of the physical world from primeval chaos are representations of the functioning of ordered societies as bulwarks against social chaos.

(2) *Uprooting of the Tree of Light*: In the center of the Sky World was a sacred Tree. Atop the tree was a luminous orb that gave off light, illumining the Sky World. In the Onondaga version, this tree was called “Tooth,” possibly alluding to the yellow dog-tooth violet. This light was soft, not harsh. Its light was not bright, but resembling twilight, with the half-light of dawn or dusk. The sacred Councils of the Sky World were held beneath the branches of Tooth. The “Tooth” tree is uprooted, leaving a gaping hole in the sky.

(3) *Sky Woman Falls to Earth*: Through this giant hole, Sky Woman cascades through the interspace to the world below. While Sky Woman was hurtling through the abyss toward the primeval sea below, the Sky People set Tooth, the Tree of Light, back into its place. Plunging precipitously without protection, Sky Woman was in great peril. As she hurtled through the mid-space between earth and sky, Heron and Loon came to her rescue. By interlocking their wings, they nestled Sky Woman in their feathery embrace and gently carried her as she descended to the world below. However, since that world was covered in water, there was no place to live, no land on which to hunt or cultivate. Without intervention, Sky Woman would not be able to survive.

(4) *Animals Dive to Bring Earth to the Surface*: Meanwhile, a giant turtle swam the primal seas. Alive to the danger that Sky Woman faced, the Great Tortoise summoned the Elder Animals to an emergency council. He offered his carapace as a dwelling place for Sky Woman. Among the Elder Animals, the valiant few who would exert themselves in their quest to save Sky Woman included Muskrat, Otter, Toad, and/or Beaver. They each made their dives in the watery depths. Rather than diving for pearls, they were diving for grains of dirt. In order to bring up mud from the ocean floor, each of these heroic spirits risked his life. In the Mohawk version, only Muskrat succeeded in retrieving a handful of this precious mud. But, in doing so, Muskrat sacrificed his life.

(5) *Earth Established on Turtle’s Back*: The mud was then placed on Turtle’s back. This spot of earth now in place, Heron and Loon could now set Sky Woman safely on her new abode below. Magically (that is, mythically), wherever Sky Woman ventured, the earth would keep spreading out before her, opening new vistas far and wide. As the land kept expanding, so every kind of plant sprouted up before her as well. This is how Turtle Island came into being.

Of the Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), third president of the United States (1801–1809), may have been aware of the original vision of America as Turtle Island. On January 10, 1802, Thomas Jefferson told a delegation of Wyandot, Ottawa, Chippewa, Powtewatamie, and Shawanese chiefs: “Your blood will mix with ours, and will spread, with ours,

over this great island.”<sup>12</sup> The expression, “this great island” was not an appellation for America current among Euro-Americans. In other words, it was definitely *not* a widely used euphemism for the United States. One must look elsewhere for the meaning of this term and for whatever allusions it likely evoked in the minds of the audience. Here, Thomas Jefferson, in ostensibly encouraging fraternity (and even intermarriage) between the Creeks and the Euro-Americans, was evidently referring to Turtle Island. While this cannot be proven, it remains an attractive hypothesis. To this day, in fact, virtually all Iroquois still call North America “Turtle Island,” as do most, if not all, Indian Nations. While certainly not the case in Jefferson’s day, the Turtle Island myth is one of the best known of all Native American myths. And the myth of Turtle Island is closely aligned with the concept of “Mother Earth.”

Since this myth depicts the creation of earth, or at least the creation of an inhabitable land, one might be tempted to regard Sky Woman as an incarnation of “Mother Earth,” who is described in the next section of this chapter. However, Sky Woman is not the same as Mother Earth. Perhaps she might be thought of as the *mother of Mother Earth*. This would be a logical way to harmonize what are really two disparate myths. Suffice it to say that myths lead independent lives. They can inhabit the same spiritual universe. Each myth is the bearer of its own moral and social truths. And so the Myth of “Mother Earth” really bears no formal relation with the myth of the Sky Woman. Sky Woman is Edenic. Mother Earth is environmentalist.

## The Myth of “Mother Earth”

The reverential idea of “Mother Earth” has become increasingly familiar in American popular culture. “Mother Earth” embodies what might be called a “gospel of environmentalism.” It is a gospel without a narrative—morally rich and ethically sound—but without discernible roots in pre-Colonial American Indian mythology. “Mother Earth” is not a person but a symbol. She is Earth personified—the “spirit” or animus of our physical world today. Furthermore, “Mother Earth” is a myth without a story—and more metaphor than myth. The essence of this myth is that Planet Earth is our collective mother. Mother Earth transcends America itself. Mother Earth has geographic boundaries, but no national borders. It is one country. Just as we should respect our own mothers, by virtue of the fact that our mothers gave birth, nourished, protected, and raised us, so also should one respect Mother Earth, who, after all, is the source of being and sustainer of all life on earth.

A scholarly controversy has been raging over whether the myth of Mother Earth—ostensibly a venerable, pan-Indian belief—is ancient or modern. Proponents of the modern origins of the myth argue that the Mother Earth myth appears to be a relatively recent invention promulgated by

scholars, popularized by the American press, and further promoted by Native Americans themselves. In a quest to find the historical roots of the belief in Mother Earth, anthropologist Sam D. Gill searched over 1,300 ethnographic records. He found only three sources for a Native American belief in a Mother Earth goddess. These were the sources from which the concept of Mother Earth was largely “invented” as the product of promoting and popularizing a once-obscure idea: “It seems that Mother Earth as a major goddess of the Indians of North America is a reality, but that she has become so only during the twentieth century.”<sup>13</sup> Thus “Mother Earth” is more of a myth *about* Native Americans than it is a myth *by* Native Americans. If Gill is right, then here is a dramatic example of American religious mythmaking, suggesting that the promotion of Mother Earth is a post-contact phenomenon.<sup>14</sup>

Yet there is evidence that Native Americans anciently regarded the earth as a common mother. Consider, for instance, this statement by Iroquois Chief Cornstalk who, on June 1, 1776, remarked: “Our white Brethren who have grown out this same Ground with ourselves—for this Big Island being our common Mother, we and they are like one Flesh and Blood.”<sup>15</sup> A reply, in kind, came from the American Commissioners for Indian Affairs to Delawares, Senecas, Munsees, and Mingos:

We are sprung from one common Mother, we were all born in this big Island; we earnestly wish to repose under the same Tree of Peace with you; we request to live in Friendship with all the Indians in the Woods. . . . We call God to Witness, that we desire nothing more ardently than that the white and red Inhabitants of this big Island should cultivate the most Brotherly affection, and be united in the firmest bands of Love and friendship.<sup>16</sup>

What is remarkable here, from both Chief Cornstalk and the American Commissioners for Indian Affairs, is the common vocabulary, evidencing the interrelationship—indeed, the very confluence—of the myths of “Turtle Island,” “Mother Earth,” and “Great Tree,” the last myth being the topic of the next section of this chapter. Citing these and other sources, Vine Deloria, effectively rebuts Sam Gill’s argument:

As a by-product of researching Indian treaties, I have come up with numerous references to Mother Earth. Of course, I did not find these references in ethnographic materials—I found them in minutes of councils and treaty negotiations . . . Indians were not sitting around in seminar rooms articulating a nature philosophy for the benefit of non-Indian students, after all. They were trying to save their lands from exploitation and expropriation.<sup>17</sup>

Deloria hastens to add that an abundance of other primary sources confirm the widespread, if not universal, indigenous belief in Mother Earth, but

“I am not going to reveal them for fear that Gill will use them in a revised version of his book and make even worse arguments to prove that white men originated them.”<sup>18</sup> Bruce Johansen adds his own thunder to Deloria’s lightning.<sup>19</sup>

The next section transitions from the myths of “Turtle Island” and “Mother Earth” to the legend of Deganawida. Here, the distinction between “myth” and “legend” is that myth is ahistorical, while legend presumably has a historical kernel, overlaid by mythical embellishments.

## The Deganawida Legend

Traditional Iroquois history is divided into three epochs represented by three epic narratives: (1) the *myth* of Sky Woman; (2) the *legend* of Deganawida; and (3) the *history* of Handsome Lake, the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Seneca prophet. “Deganawida” is a name traditionally considered too sacred to pronounce. It’s not as though the name is ineffable, as in the Jewish sacred name, called by scholars as the “Tetragrammaton,” referring to the four letters, in Hebrew, YHWH, that represent one name of God in Jewish (and Christian) tradition. “Deganawida” is fine in printed form. But it should not be spoken, as a sign of profound respect. Native Americans customarily refer to this great statesman and prophet as “the Peacemaker.” Deganawida is a legendary, yet historical figure, memorialized in traditions held to be sacred by indigenous peoples among the Iroquois Nations—and, generally, among Native Americans and Native Canadians today. The Iroquois were aboriginal inhabitants of nearly all of New York State, part of Pennsylvania, as well as the lands bordering Lakes Huron, Erie (down to present-day central Ohio), and Ontario, and the St. Lawrence River, in what are now parts of Ontario and Quebec in Canada.

The first epic, that of Sky Woman, was presented earlier in this chapter. The Deganawida tradition itself is quintessentially an origin-of-government narrative. The Deganawida epic is properly considered a “legend” in that there is a general consensus that “the Peacemaker” was a historical figure. While this legend exists in an estimated 24 recensions,<sup>20</sup> the most authoritative version is known as *Concerning the League*, which is said to be the original legend, or the most authoritative account, of the League of the Iroquois, otherwise known as the Iroquois Confederacy. This famous passage comes from one of the versions of the Deganawida Epic, which is the second of three grand cycles of tradition among the Iroquois:

I am Dekanawida and with the Five Nations’ Confederate Lords I plant the Tree of the Great Peace. . . . I name the tree the Tree of the Great Long Leaves. Under the shade of this Tree of the Great Peace we spread the soft white feathery down of the globe thistle as seats for you, Adodarhoh, and your cousin Lords. . . . Roots have spread out from the Tree of the Great

Peace, one to the north, one to the east, one to the south and one to the west. The name of these roots is The Great White Roots and their nature is Peace and Strength. . . . We place at the top of the Tree of the Long Leaves an Eagle who is able to see afar. If he sees in the distance any evil approaching or any danger threatening he will at once warn the people of the Confederacy.<sup>21</sup>

The Iroquois Confederacy—which began as the union of five Iroquois Nations, to which a sixth was later added, evidently included a total of ten nations at later points in history. The Iroquois “League of Nations” united the Mohawks, Onondagas, Senecas, Oneidas, and Cayugas. In 1714, the Tuscaroras were adopted and, in 1753, the Nanticokes and Tuteloes were incorporated, expanding the League into eight Nations.<sup>22</sup> There is evidence that the Saponi and Conoy Nations were added later, enlarging the League into ten Nations—with the Delawares being given Iroquois protection, but without formal adoption. Historian Jay Hansford Vest explains: “Although the Haudenosaunee were never referred to as the Seven, Eight, or Nine Nations following the admission of other nations, including the Tuteloes and Nanticokes, it was referenced as the Six Nations after the Tuscaroras were added to the Longhouse in 1714.”<sup>23</sup> As previously stated at the beginning of this chapter, the Andastes (the Conestogas), the Conoys (Piscataways), the Delawares (Lenni Lenapes), the Eries (the Long-tailed Cat (or Lynx) Nation), the Honniasonts, the Kah-Kwahs, the Mahicans, the Munsees, the Nanticokes, the Neutrals (Wyandots of Canada, miscalled “Hurons” by the French), the Saponis, the Squawkihaws, the Susquehannocks, the Tutelos, the Wappingers, the Wenros (or Wenronhronons), the Wyandots (or Ywendats), and the Wyomings were adopted into the league as incorporated nations.<sup>24</sup>

This League was remarkable in that it was probably the New World’s first democracy, as mentioned previously. And, if not, certainly the Confederacy was the New World’s preeminent and most influential democracy. Its greatest influence is said to have been its impact on the formation and structure of American democracy itself. In scholarly parlance, this idea that American democracy has roots in Iroquois democracy is called the “Iroquois influence thesis.” While the Iroquois influence thesis remains controversial among scholars, it is a widespread belief among Native Americans.

The Iroquois influence debate notwithstanding, most scholars accept that Deganawida was historical. Huron by birth and Mohawk by adoption, Deganawida was a prophet, statesman, and lawgiver who, along with Hiawatha and Jigonsaseh, established the Iroquois “League of People of the Longhouse” (*Haudenosaunee*), also known as the “Great League of Peace” (*Kaianerekowa*). This League, in actual practice, was vested in a council of 50 peace chiefs, or “sachems” (a term used to distinguish these from other chiefs). Each successor to a League chief was chosen by a “clan mother”

presiding over the lineage in which the title was held. The governing council required unanimous consent to render each of its decisions. The symbol of the League was the Great White Pine, or White Tree of Peace, on the top of which perched a farsighted eagle. The historicity of the League of Five Nations is not in dispute, nor is the existence and role of Deganawida himself in the formation of the original Iroquois confederacy. The traditional legend, which survives in several versions, has variations that pose no serious challenge to the unity of the narrative. Mythic elements, of course, give the legend its charm and symbolic depth to this legend, which has a historical core.

The Peacemaker legend, in its basic form, is as follows: In ancient times, Tarenyawagon (“The Holder of the Heavens”) saved the Five Nations from onslaught of the stone Giants. He conquered monsters and put the world in order. He gave laws for men to follow, taught the art of war, and provided for good fishing. Over time, the five tribes had a disagreement, and went their separate ways. Among the ancestors a child was born to a Huron virgin near the Bay of Quinte near Kingston, Ontario. This child was an incarnation of Tarenyawagon, entrusted with a great mission of peace. His first task was to cure the Iroquois of rampant cannibalism and revenge warfare (“mourning wars”).

Tradition holds that Deganawida was born in what became Canada—near present-day Kingston, Ontario, on what is now the Tyendinaga Territory on the Bay of Quinte, a place chosen by Joseph Brant for resettlement of Mohawks who, during the American War of Independence, were allies of the British. The sacred name “Deganawida” means “two river currents flowing together.”<sup>25</sup> His mother, a virgin, was told by a heavenly messenger in a dream that the child she bore was destined to plant the Tree of Peace at Onondaga (Syracuse, New York). On reaching manhood, Deganawida told his mother of the mission that the Great Spirit had chosen him to undertake, which was to bring the message of “the Good Message, the Power, the Peace, and the Great Law” to men, to establish peace founded upon justice, backed by force when needed to enforce law and order.

The time came for the Peacemaker to set out on his mission in a canoe, carved from white stone. (This may be a “miracle” that was added later to the legend as an embellishment under putative Christian influence, because an earlier version has Deganawida traveling in a canoe made of birch.) And so Deganawida crossed Lake Ontario. On the far shore, he set foot in the land of the Onondagas. There he found hunters whose village had been razed. They spoke of interminable warmongering, of the indiscriminate and heartless slaughter of innocents, and of horrific cannibalism.

Arriving at the waterfalls on the eastern side of the river, Deganawida encountered Jigonsaseh (“Fat Face”), the head mother of the Senecas. It was Jigonsaseh’s practice to feed warriors, who passed by where she lived. The Peacemaker told Jigonsaseh to stop supporting the war parties. He then

imparted to her the gospel of “the Good Message and the Power and the Peace,” as the basis of “the Great Law” set forth in *Concerning the League*: “This, then, is the reason we thank him, the one with great power, the one who is the Creator, for that which will now move forward, the Good Message and the Power and the Peace—the Great Law.” This was a powerful Message, one that claimed to be divine. Jigonsaseh accepted Deganawida’s message, and later became the Head Mother of the Haudenosaunee league of nations. This is what happened, according to Barbara A. Mann, Ph.D. (Native American, Ohio Bear Clan Seneca), Associate Professor, Honors College, University of Toledo:

Knowing that he was unable to promulgate the peace by himself, the Peacemaker sought out allies in the south, the very first of them being that Great Woman, the Head Mother of the Cultivators. He approached her with respect, urging her to add his message of Peace to her message of Corn, and, after due consideration, she agreed. However, she also insisted that he include the strong political powers of women in his Great Law. In his turn, he agreed. The two forged an alliance, coordinating their efforts thereafter.<sup>26</sup>

In his first missionary journey before becoming a statesman, the Peacemaker came to one cannibal’s lodge, that of an Onondaga warrior. Deganawida climbed the bark roof of the cannibal’s dwelling and lay, chest down, by the smoke hole. Looking down, Deganawida’s face was reflected on the surface of the water in the kettle below. After the cannibal had brewed his grisly stew of human remains, and as the warrior was about to eat his meal from a bowl made of bark, he suddenly beheld, in the boiling kettle, a face of striking handsomeness and serenity. Having no clue that this face belonged to another, the cannibal thought he saw a reflection of himself. This gave him pause for thought. On reflection, the warrior was struck by the nobility of the visage he saw, and how brutal was the life he had been living. Then and there, the warrior decided not to eat his victim. In utter revulsion, the cannibal emptied the kettle. By the fire, he brooded.

Then Deganawida climbed down, and entered the cannibal’s dwelling. They talked. As they held converse, the Peacemaker convinced the warrior that eating other men was evil and vile. Together, they buried the victim’s remains. Deganawida and the warrior hunted a deer and partook of the venison together. Deganawida then taught the warrior “the Good Message and the Power and the Peace”—and won over his first convert. Together, the two made plans to embark on a mission to bring the local nations into a peaceful confederacy. Deganawida told the warrior that the Great Spirit had ordained that antlers be worn as a sign of authority. And so the former cannibal accepted to work alongside the Peacemaker.



The greatest obstacle to the confederacy was Atotarho, chief of the Onondagas. Powerful and primal, Atotarho was a tyrant. Hideous to behold, Atotarho's body had seven crooks in it. His hair seethed with serpents. Deganawida then named his disciple, "Hiawatha" ("He Who Combs"), for Hiawatha's mission would be to comb the snakes out of Atotarho's hair. First, Deganawida, and Hiawatha successively won the allegiance of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Cayugas, and Senecas. This is how Deganawida presented his Message:

Thereupon Tekanawita [Deganawida] stood up in the center of the gathering place, and then he said: First I will answer what it means to say, "Now it is arriving, the Good Message." This, indeed, is what it means: When it stops, the slaughter of your own people who live here on earth, then everywhere peace will come about, by day and also by night, and it will come about that as one travels around, everyone will be related . . .

Now again [?], secondly I say, "Now it is arriving, the Power," and this means that the different nations, all of the nations, will become just a single one, and the Great Law will come into being, so that all now will be related to each other, and there will come to be just a single family, and in the future, in days to come, this family will continue on.

Now in turn, the other, my third saying, "Now it is arriving, the Peace," this means that everyone will become related, men and also women, and also the young people and the children, and when all are relatives, every nation, then there will be peace. . . . Then there will be truthfulness, and they will uphold hope and charity, so that it is peace that will unite all of the people, indeed, it will be as though they have but one mind, and they are a single person with only one body and one head and one life, which means that there will be unity. . . . When they are functioning, the Good Message and also the Power and the Peace, these will be the principal things everybody will live by; these will be the great values among the people.<sup>27</sup>

The Peacemaker then led the four Nations, now united under these powerful sociomoral principles, to the powerful sorcerer-chief of the Onondaga, Atotarho. In addition to his vile appearance and tyrannical abuse of power, Atotarho was also a cannibal. In order to transform Atotarho, Deganawida and Hiawatha sang the Peace Hymn. As the procession reached the Onondaga, Deganawida exorcised Atotarho of his evil spirits. Atotarho then accepted the Great Law of Peace (*Gai Eneshah Go' Nah*). Now the Iroquois Confederacy could finally be established. Deganawida and Hiawatha got Atotarho to agree to be the firekeeper of the newly formed League. Where formerly Atotarho was the principal opponent, he would now preside as its principal chief and could wield veto power at will. Furthermore, Deganawida and Hiawatha designated Onondaga as the capital of the Five Nations'

territory. After enlisting Atotarho's support, Deganawida planted the Great Tree of Peace in what is now Syracuse, New York, thus fulfilling the dream that was given to his mother.

That's the "men's version." An alternate version of what happened is recounted by Barbara A. Mann:

As Jigonsaseh and Peacemaker gained followers (including Hiawatha, a formerly formidable foe), . . . only one priest obstructed their way. He was Adodaroh [Atotarho], the deeply feared and powerful shaman of the Onondagas, whose snake and cannibal cult had terrorized the people into submission for many years. Now, however, even Adodaroh's . . . once trusted lieutenant, Hiawatha, opposed him . . .

Deeply angry, the old priest withdrew to an island that could be approached only by canoe. Twice, the Peacemaker and Hiawatha attempted parley, but twice the old man called up the winds to blow their canoe back to shore. Finally, Jigonsaseh gave the pair a powerful medicine song to calm the waters and call the ancestors. Singing her song, the Peacemaker and Hiawatha were able to approach Adodaroh, but, instead of killing or threatening him, they carried Jigonsaseh's message: If he would come over to the side of Corn and Peace, they would make him the first chairman of the Men's Grand Council of the League. Seeing his chance to retain status, the wily old man accepted their proposal.

At that point, Jigonsaseh . . . sanctioned each lineage chief, putting the horns of office on his head and announcing his election to office. . . . Early male anthropologists heard only the men's versions of the traditions, not realizing that there were equally important women's versions as well.<sup>28</sup>

There, at Onondaga, Deganawida planted the great Tree of Peace: a great white pine with white roots extending in the four sacred directions, to guide men everywhere who desired to trace peace to its source. Atop the Tree, he placed the farsighted eagle, ever vigilant and watchful of any approaching danger. Beneath the Tree of Peace, Deganawida opened a cavern into which he cast weapons of war. This was the culmination of his mission. No matter how visionary, resourceful, and effective, Deganawida's work was not merely the product of enlightened statesmanship and effective diplomacy. It was a sacred undertaking. He had achieved the sacred purpose for which he was commissioned by the Great Spirit.

In solemn ceremony, Deganawida then placed antlers on the heads of the 50 chiefs (sachems) representing the Five Nations. The respective names of each of these chiefs would be passed on to the chiefs who succeeded them). Deganawida then delivered to the sachems the canons of the Great Law, the Constitution of the Five Nations. In assessing the historical and cultural significance of the legend of Deganawida, Paul A.W. Wallace had this to say:

The legend that grew up about him [Deganawida] long served as a guide to Iroquois conduct, at home and abroad. In its various recorded versions it now appears a strange medley of religion, mythology, constitutional law, wisdom literature, animal lore, and folk custom. But the core of the narrative, which describes the practical steps taken by Dekanahwideh [sic], the Heavenly Messenger, to establish a firm League of Nations under the Tree of Peace, *has a grandeur of conception unsurpassed in popular tradition anywhere in the world.*<sup>29</sup>

To this day, the Confederacy is officially known as *Kayanerenh-kowa* (“the Great Peace”), a term that describes its sacred purpose. The League is also known as *Kanonsionni* (the “Longhouse”), a designation that describes both its constitutional structure and its geographical extent. This Longhouse is highly symbolic: Typically, the Iroquois longhouse is a dwelling built of saplings and bark, in dimensions of some 80 to 100 feet in length. Although each was within its own bark-partitioned section, several families of the same lineage occupied it. At the center of the longhouse was a hearth fire. All relatives of the extended family were under the watchful supervision of an elder matron of the lineage. By analogy, the Five Nations took counsel together in the sacred longhouse as though they were members of one family. Their meetings were actuated and guided by a pervasive sense of unity. And so it is that the social and political organization of the Five Nations is traditionally ascribed to Deganawida.

## **The Iroquois Influence Thesis: Myth or History?**

The “Iroquois Influence Thesis” has been advanced by several scholars—with Donald A. Grinde and Bruce Johansen<sup>30</sup> in the forefront—and by segments of the popular media. As stated in the previous section, the Iroquois (a French name) or Six Nations (an English name) Confederacy (who called themselves Haudenosaunee, “People of the Longhouse”) maintained a federal league of nations for several hundred years before Europeans arrived in their homeland. Their example was not lost on Benjamin Franklin, who cited their model approvingly about the time he proposed the Albany Plan of Union (1754), a precursor to the Articles of Confederation and U.S. Constitution. This example, along with other anecdotes that constitute evidence from which the “Iroquois influence” thesis may be inferred or deduced, have led to a pointed debate in our own time over their role in the evolution of democracy on a worldwide scale. Advocates insist that this example should be studied in the context of other influences, while opponents often argue that the Iroquois are being incorrectly advanced as a singular example. The Iroquois influence thesis holds that the Iroquois Confederacy, founded by Deganawida, helped shape American democracy. More to the point, the Iroquois influence thesis asserts that the

U.S. Constitution was partially modeled on the Iroquois Constitution. As the reader might expect, this thesis has sparked a vigorous scholarly debate. On what evidence is the Iroquois influence thesis based?

While it was the product of Constitutional Convention in 1787, the U.S. Constitution itself evolved from earlier constitutional agreements. A key figure in that process was Benjamin Franklin, who was greatly impressed by the Iroquois Confederacy. Franklin's advocacy of the League as a prospective model of governance begins with a speech by an Iroquois notable, which Franklin published. In 1742, at the council of Lancaster (Pennsylvania), colonists succeeded in gaining the friendship of the Iroquois, and agreed to treaty. Two years later, in confirming their treaty, the colonists were advised by Canassatego, an Iroquois chief of the Six Nations and one of the 50 sachems of the League, to unite. On Friday, July 4, 1744, in his closing speech, Canassatego recommended that British colonists form a union based on the League of the Iroquois:

WE have one Thing further to say, and that is, We heartily recommend Union and a good Agreement between you our Brethren. Never disagree, but preserve a strict Friendship for one another, and thereby you, as well as we, will become the stronger.

OUR wise Forefathers established Union and Amity between the Five Nations; this has made us formidable; this has given us great Weight and Authority with our neighbouring Nations.

WE are a powerful Confederacy; and, by your observing the same Methods our wise Forefathers have taken, you will acquire fresh strength and Power; therefore whatever befalls you, never fall out one with another.<sup>31</sup>

The official name of the treaty concluded at Lancaster was *A Treaty Held at the Town of Lancaster, By the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor of the Province, and the Honourable the Commissioners for the Province of Virginia and Maryland, with the Indians of the Six Nations in June, 1744*.<sup>32</sup> Both the Treaty and Canassatego's speech were published by Benjamin Franklin. In 1751, Franklin wrote to James Parker, his New York City printing partner, with this comment on the Iroquois League:

It would be a very strange Thing, if six Nations of Ignorant Savages should be capable of forming a Scheme for such an Union, and be able to execute it in such a Manner, as that it has subsisted Ages, and appears indissoluble; and yet that a like Union should be impracticable for ten or a Dozen English Colonies, to whom it is more necessary, and must be more advantageous; and who cannot be supposed to want an equal Understanding of their Interests.<sup>33</sup>

Although Franklin called the Iroquois "Ignorant Savages," let us see what he really meant by this term:

SAVAGES we call them, because their manners differ from ours, which we think the Perfection of Civility; they think the same of theirs. . . . Having frequent Occasions to hold public Councils, they have acquired great Order and Decency in conducting them. . . . He that would speak, rises. The rest observe a profound Silence. When he has finished and sits down, they leave him five or six Minutes to recollect, that if he has omitted anything he intended to say, or has anything to add, he may rise again and deliver it. To interrupt another, even in common Conversation, is reckoned highly indecent. How different this from the Conduct of a polite British House of Commons, where scarce a Day passes without some Confusion that makes the Speaker hoarse in calling *to order*; and how different from the mode of Conversation in many polite Companies of Europe, where if you do not deliver your Sentence with great Rapidity, you are cut off in the middle of it by the impatient Loquacity of those you converse with, and never suffer'd to finish it.<sup>34</sup>

Following the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, the fledgling Republic was governed by the Articles of Confederation. It is here that the Iroquois influence thesis finds its greatest claim, because the Articles were based on an earlier document, known as the Albany Plan of Union. In 1754, Benjamin Franklin formalized his 1751 recommendation to James Parker in the "Albany Plan of Union," which was an important precursor to the U.S. Constitution. Franklin proposed the Albany Plan of Union as a model of governance under which the colonies might be united.

The Albany Congress was held from June 19 to July 10, 1754. As the name indicates, the Congress was held in Albany, New York. Benjamin Franklin was the most influential of the delegates present. Besides Franklin's presence and prestige, several Iroquois attended the Congress as well. Among these was a certain "Hendrick" (known as "Tiyanoga" among the Iroquois), who served as one of the principal representatives of the Six Nations at the Albany Congress.

Prior to leaving Philadelphia to attend the Congress in Albany, besides gaining the support of the leading political figures of his day, Franklin saw the need to rally public opinion behind his Plan for Union. He published an article, datelined Philadelphia, May 9, 1754, in his newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, urging the need for a union of the colonies and pointing to the fact that "our enemies have the great advantage of being under one direction, with one council, and one purse." This is a transparent reference to the Iroquois Confederacy. In a historic moment in journalist history, Benjamin Franklin illustrated the article by printing a political cartoon: a woodcut of a snake segmented into parts, representing the colonies, with the motto beneath: "JOIN OR DIE." This motto, "Join or Die," was used again to launch the American Revolution.<sup>35</sup>

Franklin began his Plan of Union proposal with this recommendation: "1. That the said General Government be administered by a President

General, to be appointed and Supported by the Crown; and a Grand Council, to be Chosen by the Representatives of the People of the Several Colonies, met in their respective Assemblies.”<sup>36</sup> Proponents of the Iroquois influence thesis hold that Franklin’s Plan of Union was loosely modeled on the Iroquois Confederacy. His proposed “Grand Council” was similar to the Iroquois Great Council, with 48 representatives, close to the 50 sachems of Iroquois. In fact, James de Lancy, acting governor of New York, expressed to those assembled his hope that there would emerge an agreement to form a union of states as powerful and prominent as the Iroquois League itself.<sup>37</sup>

While Franklin’s proposal was approved by the Albany Congress, the Albany Plan of Union was not ratified by the colonial legislatures. Thus it never took effect. While Franklin’s Plan was not ratified, it later served as the basis for the Articles of Confederation, which was, as mentioned earlier, a precursor to the U.S. Constitution. Thus, the Albany Plan of Union was a significant milestone in the evolution of the U.S. Constitution. At that stage in the events leading up to the adoption of the Constitution, Iroquois influence was arguably present. The debate is over just how influential that Iroquois presence really was.

Even if the Iroquois influence thesis is a myth without historical foundation, this myth has influenced the Congress of the United States of America. Indeed, the fact that the Iroquois influence thesis has enjoyed popular support is reflected in a Congressional resolution, passed in 1988. On September 16, 1987, Senator Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) introduced S.Con.Res. 76. On July 11, 1988, similar legislation was introduced by Representative Morris Udall (D-Arizona) in the House of Representatives as H.Con.Res. 331. On October 4, 1988, the House passed H.Con. Res. 331—*A concurrent resolution to acknowledge the contribution of the Iroquois Confederacy of Nations to the development of the United States Constitution and to reaffirm the continuing government-to-government relationship between Indian tribes and the United States established in the Constitution*—by a vote of 408–8. By voice vote, the Senate agreed to H.Con.Res. 331 on October 21, 1988. That resolution reads, in part:

Whereas the original framers of the Constitution, including, most notably, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, are known to have greatly admired the concepts of the six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy; Whereas, the Confederation of the original Thirteen Colonies into one republic was influenced by the political system developed by the Iroquois Confederacy as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the Constitution itself; . . . *Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring)*, That—(1) the Congress, on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the signing of the United States Constitution, acknowledges contribution made by the Iroquois

Confederacy and other Indian Nations to the formation and development of the United States.<sup>38</sup>

In 2007, U.S. Representative Joe Baca and U.S. Senator Daniel Inouye, respectively, introduced H.R. 3585 and S. 1852 to the House and Senate, to wit: *Native American Heritage Day Act of 2007*, “A bill to designate the Friday after Thanksgiving of each year as ‘Native American Heritage Day’ in honor of the achievements and contributions of Native Americans to the United States.” This proposed legislation, in its current draft, acknowledges the contribution of the Iroquois League of Nations. This draft resolution reads, in part: “Congress finds that . . . the Founding Fathers based the provisions of the Constitution on the unique system of democracy of the six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, which divided powers among the branches of government and provided for a system of checks and balances.”<sup>39</sup>

Here, to invoke the words of one historian commenting on eighteenth-century history, “the mystique of Iroquois unity and power had taken on a life of its own.”<sup>40</sup> The Iroquois influence thesis has indeed taken on a life of its own, as the Congressional resolution clearly illustrates. As one scholar notes: “Despite the highly speculative nature of the evidence, this misconception has become a shibboleth, one which has been given even the official imprimatur of the United States Senate (United States Congress, Senate Resolution No. 76 [Washington, DC: U.S.G.P.O., 1988]).”<sup>41</sup>

The Iroquois influence thesis, in the estimation of one authority, “has become a revisionist narrative about the birth of the United States.”<sup>42</sup> The purpose of this revisionist theory is that it allows for a multicultural understanding of how America came to be the republic that it is today. Whether revisionist or not, the “Iroquois Influence Thesis” represents a Native American vision of America. To the extent that the Great Spirit had commissioned Deganawida to establish the Iroquois League, then this revisionist vision of America has a religious dimension in addition to its primarily secular application. And to the extent that the Iroquois influence thesis has succeeded in gaining considerable popular support—as well as limited support in the Academy (that is, among a minority of scholars) and in Congress—then it has exerted its own influence on mainstream America. To this day, the United States of America Embassy carries Bruce Johansen’s article, “Native American Ideas of Governance and U.S. Constitution,” on its website.<sup>43</sup>

To conclude, this chapter has treated Native American spiritual (and actual) visions of America in four dimensions. (Native Americans do not have formal religions, but spiritual traditions.) It is safe to say that the myth of “Turtle Island” and “Mother Earth,” as well as the Deganawida legend and the “Iroquois Influence Thesis,” have taken their rightful place in American popular culture, in the halls of Congress, and in the ivory tower of the Academy itself.



*Figure 2.2.* Idealized statue of “Hiawatha,” co-founder of the Iroquois Confederacy. Sculpture in National Park Seminary, in Silver Spring, Maryland. Photo by Jack E. Boucher, 2001.

(Public domain. Library of Congress. See <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/md1503.photos.216580p/>.)



## Chapter 2 Update: The Peacemaker's Message to America and the World

*I am the Peacemaker and from the north I have come . . . The Creator sent me here on earth . . . He intended everyone to have a good mind on the earth you travel. . . . First, he intended all the people should be having peaceful thoughts in their minds. Then love will come from that . . . And if they do have love, then from it will come compassion . . . Each and every one of you has the power. Whatever power you have comes from what you have thought. Then that comes from a good mind. He intended you all to be helping each other.*

— Deganawida (c. 1150 or 1450)<sup>44</sup>

The Peacemaker's message continues to be relevant today.

The Iroquois Confederacy is widely regarded as the oldest notable democracy in the New World and as a prototype of the United Nations. That recognition has become increasingly public. In 2010—a year after the publication of the first edition of *Religious Myths and Visions of America* (2009)—the United States Mint (the world's largest coin manufacturer) issued its “Native American \$1 Coin” (as a “numismatic product” for collectors). On the reverse, this handsomely executed coin of the American realm features an image of the Hiawatha Belt, with five arrows bound together, along with the inscriptions “Haudenosaunee” (“People of the Longhouse”) and “Great Law of Peace.” The official description reads, in part:

The Haudenosaunee Confederation, also known as the Iroquois Confederacy of upstate New York, was remarkable for being founded by 2 historic figures, the Peacemaker and his Onondaga spokesman, Hiawatha, who spent years preaching the need for a league. The Peacemaker sealed the treaty by symbolically burying weapons at the foot of a Great White Pine, or Great Tree of Peace, whose 5-needle clusters stood for the original 5 nations: Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca.<sup>45</sup>

True to its motto, “Connecting America through Coins,” the United States Mint has drawn full public recognition of the contribution of the Peacemaker (Deganawida) and Hiawatha, to the founding of the first great New World democracy, well before the United States of America was established as a country. Even from a Native American perspective (if only from a vocal minority and not a majority), it's now time to make the teachings of the Peacemaker known, far and wide.

There was a dramatic instance of this back in 1992. Iroquoian ethnologist, Michael K. Foster, Curator Emeritus, Canadian Museum of Civilization, recounts how Chief Jacob (“Jake”) Ezra Thomas (Snipe Clan) (d. 1998), a prominent proponent and interpreter of Haudenosaunee culture, in September 1992, took the unprecedented step of reciting the Great Law in English

(drawing much indigenous indignation thereby), in a nine-day event on the grounds of his home on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario, which attracted national media coverage. Some 2,000 people were present. Many were non-Iroquois, i.e., “whites.” “Jake” repeated the event in June, 1994 (“The Great Law of Peace Recital”). Chief Thomas, responding to criticism, offered this justification, according to Foster:

I think the white man needs to understand. It isn't that he's going to take the law and use it himself. . . . They already did! The 13 colonies already took the Great Law for their so-called Constitution. So what should we be afraid of? . . . If they want to learn it, they have a right to. That should have been done 500 years ago, to study and respect the Confederacy. Maybe we wouldn't have the problems we have today if they would have studied our people, and [would now] understand and honor and respect [us].<sup>46</sup>

Let me take the liberty of switching to a “first-person” voice here. What Jake Thomas is saying is quite important. It represents a radical departure from the traditional practice of safeguarding knowledge of the Peacemaker, which is the responsibility of the “Faithkeeper” of sacred indigenous tradition. Further to Chief Jake Thomas’ perspective that increasing public awareness of the teachings of the Peacemaker would be a good thing, in November 2014, I submitted a 10,000-word article on Deganawida to the *American Writers* series.<sup>47</sup> At first, it was difficult to justify including Deganawida in the *American Writers* series, for the simple reason that the Peacemaker was not a writer, as there were no books or publications in an oral culture in that day and age. A critic may well ask: “How can Deganawida be considered a writer, when there was no writing prior to European contact?” And further: “How can Deganawida be considered a literary figure when there was no formal literature produced in his day and age?” My justification was simply that Deganawida was the “author” of a sacred tradition, the fullest and most complete version of which has been translated as *Concerning the League*,<sup>48</sup> and which may be considered of such universal significance that it is recognized as belonging to the class of “world literature.”

Let me hasten to add that I cannot speak for Native Americans. The best that I can do is to represent some of their perspectives, as I best understand them. I've tried my best to do just that. In the process of writing on Deganawida, I received valuable input from the following scholars: Barbara A. Mann, Ph.D. (Native American, Ohio Bear Clan Seneca), Associate Professor, Honors College, University of Toledo, author of *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000, 3rd printing, 2006); (2) Donald A. Grinde, Jr., Ph.D. (Native American, Yamassee), Professor, Department of Transnational Studies, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York, editor and author of *A Political History of Native Americans* (Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press/Sage, 2002 [Choice Outstanding Academic Title 2003]); (3) Bruce E. Johansen, Ph.D., Jacob J. Isaacson

University Research Professor, Communication and Native American Studies, University of Nebraska at Omaha, author of *Encyclopedia of the American Indian Movement* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO/Greenwood, 2013); and (4) Clifford F. Abbott (Linguist), Professor of Information and Computing Science at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay, author of *Oneida Teaching Grammar* (University of Wisconsin–Green Bay, 2006). This was no warranty against any errors on my part, for which I take full responsibility.

As I understand it, a Native American perspective on America (referred to in Iroquois culture as “Turtle’s Island”) necessarily includes past, present, and future considerations. The Peacemaker may be said to represent all three Native American outlooks on America. As to the past, it’s important to understand that the traditions surrounding Deganawida are more properly understood as “legends” rather than “myths.” C.J. Taylor, a Mohawk artist and author of the handsomely illustrated children’s book, *Peace Walker: The Legend of Hiawatha and Tekanawita*,<sup>49</sup> prefers the term “legend” in reference to the Peacemaker traditions, with the understanding that a legend is based on a historical kernel of facts, with mythic embellishments, which combine to convey spiritual and cultural truths, as well as distant memory of a great event in the past.

A Native American vision of America has both environmental and social dimensions. The social dimensions are quite obvious in history, when the Peacemaker, with Hiawatha and the Peace Queen, united the Five Nations—one appreciation of which is worth quoting at length:

That International Relations has shown little interest in Indigenous peoples may seem odd to readers who know something of the many well-documented histories of Indigenous diplomacies enacted both within and without the colonial encounter. Long predating the arrival of Europeans in the Americas and elsewhere, networks of exchange and interaction existed, wars were fought, and conflicts were resolved in the routine course of relations between Indigenous peoples. For two centuries, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, to take but one example, stood as a paragon of peaceful relations between erstwhile antagonists—a concord still unmatched in profundity and resilience by even the most celebrated of Europe’s diplomatic triumphs.<sup>50</sup>

The Peacemaker’s significance for the present may be represented by indigenous diplomacy, and further by *The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP), adopted by the United Nations on September 13, 2007. The Peacemaker’s legacy for the future may unfold in future representations at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) and in other international fora. Deganawida’s principles of good governance are relevant today. Assuming that, outside indigenous societies, the Peacemaker’s system cannot be replicated, aspects of it can be adapted, ethically if not procedurally.

What does this mean for America? On April 17, 2008, Chief Oren Lyons, in his speech, “Looking Toward the Seventh Generation,” at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona, said, in part:

There was a spiritual being, messenger we called “the Peacemaker” . . . and he laid down for us the whole constitution based on peace, the principle of peace and health, of equity, justice for the people and of unity, the power of the good minds and the power of the collective working together—one mind, one body, one heart, one spirit. And we’ve prospered under that instruction over these many years . . .

When the Peacemaker finally had laid out the whole system for us, he said, “Now I’m going to plant this great tree of peace, this great white pine.” . . . He said, “Make your decisions on behalf of the seventh generation coming.” . . .

And when the Peacemaker was instructing the leaders so long ago, he said, “Now into your hands I am placing the responsibility for all life in this world.” And he meant all the trees and all the fish and all the animals and all the medicine and all the water and everything there is, all life, and that’s a responsibility that has kept us here all these years. That’s how we’ve survived . . .

And so the instructions that our people had a long time ago still reverberate.<sup>51</sup>

The Peacemaker’s message connects America with the rest of the world, just as Turtle Island is part of Mother Earth, and is a guiding light for the next seven generations and beyond. A parting thought: Turtle Island is real. Artistically at least, North America has all the contours of a turtle of oceanic proportions. Imagine the continent of North America as perched on the vast shell of Turtle’s back. Now visualize North America, poised on the giant tortoise’s carapace, as seen from the sky. From this vantage, east to west, Florida is the right hindleg. Baja California (peninsula in Mexico) is the left back leg. Central America (Mexico through Panama) is the tail. Alaska is the left foreleg. Nova Scotia is the right. The Turtle’s head is left of Hudson Bay. Iroquois artists are fond of depicting North America in the image of the Turtle of Haudenosuantee lore.<sup>52</sup> All of this predates satellites, etc. Maybe Sky Woman, in ancient times, drew a picture! Mythic as Sky Woman and Turtle may be, their traditions convey an environmentalist message, grounded in reality.

Permit me to make a final point. This chapter has focused on Native American myths and visions of America, including the legendary, yet historical prophet and statesman, Deganawida (“the Peacemaker”), who arguably ranks among the great individuals of world history, and whose epic (replete with laws and sacred ceremonies)—as memorialized in the fullest published version, *Concerning the League*—properly belongs in the canon of world literature, taking its rightful place among “the great

books” of human culture. We considered the original inhabitants of Turtle Island, who are really the first Americans in North America (i.e., Native Americans, Native Canadians and the indigenous peoples of Mexico). Let’s take a moment to reflect upon the history of hardships and injustices perpetrated on these sovereign nations at the hands of European-Americans, who claimed a God-given right to colonize, Christianize, and civilize the so-called *terra nullius* (“empty land”), unjustly justified by the doctrines of discovery, of adverse possession, of conquest, and of cession. Without going into legal and historical details, suffice it to say that this occupation of ancestral lands was not simply the naked assertion of land title by right, but the forcible relocation of Native Americans from their ancestral lands, accompanied by such draconian policies as that of forced assimilation—most notoriously implemented by government-funded and religiously-run boarding schools across “Indian country”—whose “mission” was to “Kill the Indian to save the man,” as Richard Henry Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in 1879, infamously said.

To the best of my knowledge, the U.S. government never apologized, nor offered reparations, for its policies and actions taken against Native Americans. The closest that the federal government ever came to making such an apology took place on September 8, 2000, when Kevin Gover—the director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and himself a Native American (Pawnee)—apologized on behalf of the BIA on the occasion of its 175th anniversary. The irony here is that it took a Native American to apologize to fellow Native Americans for what the American government had done, pursuant to federal policies carried out by the BIA. The press reported that some 300 tribal leaders were present, some of whom openly wept during the apology, as it touched on such painful memories as the Trail of Tears (summer of 1838), the Sand Creek Massacre (November 29, 1864), the Washita River Massacre (November 27, 1868), the Wounded Knee Massacre (December 29, 1890) and a host of other tragic, and all-too-often genocidal, episodes in American history.

Having read the text of Kevin Gover’s “Never Again” speech, I naturally wondered if the event had been videotaped. If so, then the video would certainly be of interest as a teaching tool for classroom use. There could (or should) be some popular interest in this signal event, even though the news story came and went. So I decided to request a videotape of the event. It took awhile, but eventually the BIA did send me a copy of the videotape on a VHS cassette. I later had the videotape digitized, and then posted it online. The video is public domain. Then, on February 9, 2004, I offered the first public showing of Kevin Gover’s “Never Again” apology on video. In introducing this historic apology to the audience of students and faculty at Michigan State University (MSU), I spoke about all the “red tape” that I had to go through in order to obtain the video, which took persistent efforts for approximately a year or so. (Whereupon the MSU Director of the American

Indian Studies Program, Dr. Patrick LeBeau, was quick to quip: “We call that ‘white tape!’”) Two years later, I published a journal article on Kevin Gover’s apology on behalf of the BIA in the *Wicazo Sa Review*.<sup>53</sup> I invite the reader to close this book now, and to view the video at this very moment.<sup>54</sup> More than taking a moment of silence, take this moment to reflect, as Kevin Gover’s speech gives pause for thought.

## Notes

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3. Barbara A. Mann, and Jerry L. Fields. “A Sign in the Sky: Dating the League of the Haudenosaunee,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 21.2 (August 1997): 105–163. See also Bruce E. Johansen, “Dating the Iroquois Confederacy.” *Akwesasne Notes* 1.3/4 (Fall 1995): 62–63.
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11. Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse*, 34.
12. Qtd. in Donald A. Grinde, Jr. and Bruce E. Johansen, *Exemplar of Liberty: Native America and the Evolution of Democracy* (Los Angeles: American Indian Studies Center, University of California, 1991).
13. Sam D. Gill, *Mother Earth: An American Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 129.
14. Sam D. Gill, “The Academic Study of Religion.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62 (Winter 1994): 965–975.
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16. Morgan Letterbook, *American Commissioners for Indian Affairs to Delawares, Senecas, Munsees, and Mingos* (Pittsburgh, 1776). Qtd. in Richard White, *The Middle Ground*, 366.
17. Vine Deloria, Jr., "Comfortable Fictions and the Struggle for Turf: An Essay Review of *The Invented Indian: Cultural Fictions and Government Policies*." *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*. Ed. Devon A. Mihesuah (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 65–83 [77]. See also Ward Churchill, "A Little Matter of Genocide: Sam Gill's Mother Earth, Colonialism and the Appropriation of Indigenous Spiritual Tradition in Academia." *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema, and the Colonization of American Indians*. Ed. M. Annette Jaimes (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1992). 187–213.
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19. Bruce E. Johansen, "Mother Earth or Mother Lode?: Chief Sea'thl, Black Elk, and Luther Standing Bear," *Shapers of the Great Debate on Native Americans on Land, Spirit, and Power: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 143–176.
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27. Deganawida, qtd. in John Arthur Gibson, *Concerning the League: The Iroquois League Tradition as Dictated in Onondaga by John Arthur Gibson. Newly Elicited, Edited and Translated by Hanni Woodbury in Collaboration with Reg Henry and Harry Webster on the Basis of A. A. Goldenweiser's Manuscript* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Algonquian and Iroquoian Linguistics, 1992), 36–41.
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  35. See Richard B. Morris, “Benjamin Franklin’s Grand Design: The Albany Plan of Union Might Have Made the Revolution Unnecessary.” *American Heritage Magazine* 7.2 (February 1956).
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  37. Randall G. Holcombe, “Constitutional Theory and the Constitutional History of Colonial America.” *The Independent Review* 3.1 (Summer 1998): 21–36. (See 27–32.)
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  41. Laurence M. Hauptman, Chapter Three, “Speculations on the Constitution.” *Tribes and Tribulations: Misconceptions about American Indians and their Histories* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press), 27.
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*Figure 3.1.* Flag and cross atop Protestant church in Lansing, Michigan. (Photo courtesy of David Smith.)

## Chapter 3

# Protestant Myths and Visions of America

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*Wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the Eies of all people are uppon us.*

—John Winthrop (1630)<sup>1</sup>

*In the beginning was the word, “America,” and the word was in the Bible, and the word was made flesh in the Americans, this new breed of humans, destined to build a shining city upon a hill.*

—Sacvan Bercovitch (1982)<sup>2</sup>

Native American visions of America were succeeded by Protestant visions of America.

Turtle’s Back gave way to Plymouth Rock. The founding myths of America, therefore, are Puritan in particular and Protestant in general. These myths are as enduring as they were originative. Until recently, Protestant visions held sway as the dominant “master myth” of America. Essentially, the Protestant quest for a Christian America gave rise to a Protestant nationalism that united the dominant Protestant groups in a common vision of the spiritual mission and destiny of America. Consequently, most of the later religious visions of America may be broadly conceived as transformations of the foundational myths of America. Subsequent, non-Protestant visions of America typically presuppose their Protestant predecessors, if only because they are competing ways of understanding America’s mission and destiny. There are splendid exceptions, to be sure. And there is something decidedly “ethnic”—even racial—about these Protestant myths of America, as Eric Kaufmann explains:

In the case of the United States, the national ethnic group was Anglo-American Protestant (“American”). *This was the first European group to “imagine” the territory of the United States as its homeland and traces its genealogy back to New World colonists who rebelled against their mother country.*

In its mind, the American nation-state, its land, its history, its mission, and its Anglo-American people were woven into one great tapestry of the imagination. This social construction considered the United States to be founded by the “Americans,” who thereby had title to the land and the mandate to mould the nation (and any immigrants who might enter it) in their own Anglo-Saxon, Protestant self-image.<sup>3</sup>

This nativist Protestant complex of myths and symbols springs out of shared experience and a common biblical heritage. In fact, biblical interpretations were projected onto the American experience—as though the Bible, reconditely, already had something to say about America. The Bible was a veritable quarry from which foundational and enduring social metaphors were hewn, and an edifice of the imagination was thereby constructed. In a word, “America” was “God’s new Israel.” America was the Promised Land—but only after the Canaanites of the New World (the Native Americans) were conquered and displaced.

## The Puritan Myth of America

“*In the beginning was the word, and the word was with the New England Way, and the word became ‘America,’*”<sup>4</sup> wrote the acclaimed Americanist, Sacvan Bercovitch. The Puritans established what has come to be regarded as the foundational myth of America. Their vision generated the greater—and perhaps grander—Protestant master myth of America: “The Puritans provided the scriptural basis for what we have come to call the myth of America.”<sup>5</sup> Again mimicking the style of the prologue of the Gospel of John, Bercovitch characterizes the Puritan myth of America so: “*In the beginning was the word, ‘America,’ and the word was in the Bible, and the word was made flesh in the Americans, this new breed of humans, destined to build a shining city upon a hill.*”<sup>6</sup> Here, Bercovitch’s reference to “City upon a Hill” alludes to the first definitive Puritan discourse on America, “A Modell of Christian Charity” (1630), which is John Winthrop’s speech to his fellow Puritans aboard the *Arbella*, on its voyage across the Atlantic to the Massachusetts coast. This homily was destined to become one of the most powerful, pervasive, and persistent visions of America—the doctrine of American exceptionalism.

The Puritan myth of America was first articulated by the Honorable John Winthrop, Esq. (1588–1649), who was appointed as the governor of the Company of the Massachusetts Bay. The good ship, *Arbella* (formerly called the *Eagle*) was the designated admiral of a fleet of 11 vessels that transported the Massachusetts Bay company across the Atlantic, with the celebrated *Mayflower* being among them. (The *Mayflower* had taken the first band of Puritans to America ten years earlier.) The *Arbella* weighed 350 tons, and carried 28 guns along with its 52 men. Tuesdays and Wednesdays were appointed to catechize the passengers. One such catechism, “A Modell

of Christian Charity” (no date, except the year 1630, is associated with it) reads, in part:

Thus stands the case between God and us. We are entered into a Covenant with Him for this work. We have taken out a commission. . . . For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of other’s necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other; make other’s condition our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall *we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace*. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways. So that we shall see much more of his wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when he shall make us a praise and a glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “The Lord make it likely that of *New England*.” For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.<sup>7</sup>

Here, the “City upon a hill” alludes to one of the timeless sayings of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.”<sup>8</sup> By “City,” Winthrop meant Puritan “society”—the salient characteristics of which may be briefly described as follows: Puritans were bound by a solemn “Covenant” to God and by their joint “commission” to further the commercial interests of the Massachusetts Bay company. Among these godly and enterprising pilgrims, the words (in their original italics), “*we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace*,” were meant to foster bonds of unity, of corporate identity, and of collective purpose. In the fuller text of this homily, brief scriptural references are made, invoking biblical precedent for what was promoted as an exemplary Christian society. Governor Winthrop exhorts the community to aspire to such moral nobility and material success as to excite the admiration and envy of others, such “that we shall be as a City upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.” What was being promoted here—that the new society strive to be exemplary spiritually and materially—was all well and good. But this same sense of “mission”—which, in the words of the present writer, was to *colonize*, *Christianize*, and *civilize*—also contained the seeds of missionary expansion by conquest.

The Puritans frequently cited or alluded to passages of scripture, as though the Bible had foreordained the Puritan errand into the wilderness of America. This was possible to accomplish through constructing an

exegetical bridge between the biblical past and the contemporary present. Puritans used the interpretative technique of *presentism*, aptly named, to apply the Israelite past to the American present. That is, the Puritans interpreted the Bible in the present tense. All events in the Bible were seen as *typological*—that is, as forecasts of things to come, as part of a divine drama in which the Puritans themselves played a central role.

Certain biblical motifs fall into focus here. Gary Gerstle traces “the origins of American mythology” to “biblical notions of Israelite persecution, chosenness, and deliverance.”<sup>9</sup> The Puritans were fleeing religious persecution, were divinely elected (chosen by God) to establish an exemplary society in a New World, and were successfully delivered to America in furtherance of that mission. Hence, the Puritans’ escape from persecution in the Old World to emancipation in the New World finds its scriptural prototype in the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt, where America becomes the Promised Land and “God’s New Israel,” which is the title of a major collection of mostly Protestant visions of America, skillfully anthologized by Conrad Cherry.<sup>10</sup> A fuller description of the Puritan vision of America—Edenic and messianic—is epitomized by Gerstle so:

[T]he Puritans who fled religious oppression in England . . . conceived of America as their Promised Land. Their reference to the journey of the Israelites was hardly accidental or casual. The Puritans knew the Old Testament well and, in the persecution of the Israelites at the hands of Egyptian authorities, in their wanderings through the desert wilderness, in their embrace of God’s covenant, and in their deliverance to the Promised Land of Israel, the Puritans found precedents for their own saga of suffering and redemption. Like the Israelites’ settlement of Canaan, the Puritans’ conquest of the American wilderness would yield a new society, a society so pure and blinding in its light, so special in its unique covenant with God, that the rest of God’s creatures would turn to America for salvation. The Puritans believed that they, like the Israelites, had been chosen by God to carry a message of deliverance and renewal to the entire world. This deep sense of mission, which would in the 19th century come to be known as “Manifest Destiny,” has been part of America’s self-identity ever since.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, the Puritans’ sense of mission, in time, evolved into the American expansionist doctrine of “Manifest Destiny,” with its unabashedly imperialist aspirations. The Puritan myth of America is really a constellation of motifs, where several major sub-themes coalesce: exodus, destiny, wilderness, and prosperity. The first two motifs—exodus and destiny—primarily relate to the idea of the Puritan *covenant*, while the latter two motifs—wilderness and prosperity—accentuate conquest and prosperity, as Szilvia Csábi explains:

Conceptual metaphors and metonymies concerning America were often used in Puritan literary works. The various metaphors have different entailments, and they highlight and hide different aspects of Puritan experiences. The principal conceptual metaphors can be clustered under a “master metaphor”: THE SETTLEMENT OF AMERICA IS THE MOVEMENT OF THE JEWS FROM EGYPT TO ISRAEL. This master metaphor can be broken down into three basic sub-metaphors—AMERICA IS THE PROMISED LAND, AMERICA IS A WILDERNESS, and GOING TO AMERICA IS ENACTING A BUSINESS DEAL. Several excerpts from Puritan literary works will illustrate the coherent though flexible use of these metaphors: they lived by certain metaphors . . . These metaphors appear to be so powerful and appropriate in a wide variety of situations that they are used over several generations.<sup>12</sup>

The Protestant master myth of America is inflected by the great Puritan myth of the City on a Hill. America is a land specially favored by God. The conceptualization of America as the Promised Land was the best known and most elaborate Puritan metaphor for America.<sup>13</sup> The source domain of this conceptual metaphor is Canaan. The target domain is America.<sup>14</sup> Szilvia Csábi observes:

Within the metaphor AMERICA IS THE PROMISED LAND, the mappings are systematic: America is the Holy Land, Canaan, and New England is the City of God; the Puritan settlers are the selected people of God. Interestingly, the terms the city of Jerusalem, the city of God, the Promised Land and the land of Canaan can be seen as “co-referential” in the sense that metaphorically they are equivalent or identical images of God’s kingdom manifest on earth.<sup>15</sup>

This Puritan ideal soon proved contagious, for it excited the wider American imagination.

The impact of the Puritans’ vision of America on subsequent American self-identity and political policy has been long-recognized by historians. John Winthrop’s famous speech aboard the *Arbella* has had its own trajectory, down to the present. This is just one recent example of what has now come to be an accepted fact of American history: “John Winthrop’s 1630 *Arbella* address to his fellow Puritans has evolved over the course of American history into a justification for American expansionism on missionary grounds.”<sup>16</sup> In an important sense, the Puritan “myth of America”—the corporate ideal of a purified community of saints visibly identified with the national body politic—was mapped onto the consumer utopia of a “culture of abundance.”<sup>17</sup> That is, if Americans were faithful to their spiritual covenant and were diligent in their material endeavors (i.e., their “commission”), then Providence would bless their affairs. In fine, the blending

of Puritan literary texts clearly show that Puritans thought of America as God's "Promised Land."

For a local idea to catch on—and eventually to be taken up by a nation at large—how did the Puritan vision of America excite the popular imagination? The way in which the Puritan sense of America's mission and destiny was transmitted to the rest of Protestant America was through what is known as the Great Awakening (1725–1750), as Eric Kaufmann explains:

New England's Puritan sense of election and mission, and its description of America as a New Canaan, or promised land, slowly came to infect the entire nation. Its vision also came to influence the American outlook through a nation-wide religious revival known as the Great Awakening (1725–50). John Armstrong has noted that religion provided one of the few vehicles of mass communication in the pre-modern era and it was religion that was largely responsible for American intercolonial integration in the eighteenth century." Led by Jonathan Edwards, amongst others, the Great Awakening spread like wildfire across the colonies from New England to Georgia, and is described by some as the first instance of American self-consciousness.<sup>18</sup>

It is from this point forward that the metaphor of America as a "redeemer nation" takes hold.

## The "Manifest Destiny" Myth

As already pointed out in Chapter 1, nearly every American student learns of "Manifest Destiny"—the American imperial myth. Simply put, the doctrine of Manifest Destiny translates American exceptionalism into action. Manifest Destiny is the doctrine that Euro-Americans had a God-given right to conquer and colonize North America, and eventually to civilize and imperialize Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. Manifest Destiny is a salient theme in American history that runs through the Indian Wars, the U.S.–Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, the wars across the Arc of Rimland Asia, and beyond. The term "manifest destiny" was first coined in 1845 by John L. O'Sullivan (1813–1895), founder and editor of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, in this editorial:

Why, were other reasoning wanting, in favor of now elevating this question of the reception of Texas into the Union, out of the lower region of our past party dissensions, up to its proper level of a high and broad nationality, it surely is to be found, found abundantly, in the manner in which other nations have undertaken to intrude themselves into it, between us and the proper parties to the case, in a spirit of hostile interference



against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.<sup>19</sup>

This phrase was contagious and quickly attached itself to official American expansionist ideology. One historian comments on the tremendous impact these words exerted: “Here was the powerful phrase that promoted continental expansion, resulting in a doubling of American territory in four years.”<sup>20</sup> Soon after, the concept of Manifest Destiny was quickly introduced to Congress.

Robert C. Winthrop (1809–1894), Representative of Massachusetts, was a descendant of John Winthrop, first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, who was met in the previous section. While John Winthrop was the one who established the Puritan vision of America as a “City upon a hill,” it was Robert Winthrop who first formally introduced the doctrine of “Manifest Destiny” in Congress. Although the existing literature, reviewed in preparation for this chapter, notes the blood relationship, the ideological relationship has not been directly connected. This is not to suggest that the genealogical ties by blood provides a direct genealogy of ideology, but it is quite curious that one of the earliest theorists of Manifest Destiny was a direct descendant of John Winthrop. This tantalizes the larger hypothesis that Manifest Destiny represents a further development of Puritan ideology. That is, America, after first aspiring to be a “City upon a hill,” embarked on a conscious quest to, in effect, become “King of the hill.” A word of caution here: although Robert C. Winthrop was the first to articulate the doctrine of Manifest Destiny before Congress, he cites the doctrine in order to oppose it. On January 3, 1846, in a speech in the House of Representatives, Representative Robert C. Winthrop of Massachusetts articulated the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, in what has been described as “first public utterance of the phrase,”<sup>21</sup> of “manifest destiny”—albeit with sardonic disdain:

There is one element in our title [to Oregon], however, which I confess that I have not named, and to which I may not have done entire justice. I mean that new revelation of right which has been designated as *the right of our manifest destiny to spread over this whole continent*. It has been openly avowed in a leading Administration journal that this, after all, is our best and strongest title—one so clear, so pre-eminent, so indisputable, that if Great Britain had all our other titles in addition to her own, they would weigh nothing against it. The right of our manifest destiny! There is a right for new chapter in the law of nations; or rather, in the special laws of our own country; for I suppose the right to a manifest destiny to spread will not be admitted to exist in any nation except the universal Yankee nation!

To the extent that Winthrop has correctly represented the doctrine that he himself opposed, this is a remarkable statement. Note the repeated use of the word “right,” as if for rhetorical emphasis. Without explicitly saying so, there is an elliptical sense that, by “right,” a sense of divine prerogative or of a “God-given” right is meant. Also note the doctrine of American exceptionalism is part and parcel of this doctrine. As formulated here, the specific exception, legitimized by American exceptionalism, is that American domestic policy, if not foreign policy, requires and justifies a clear deviation from the prevailing “law of nations.” To the extent that appropriation and annexation of Oregon to the territory of the United States is being legitimized by advocates of Manifest Destiny, technically this would fall under the rubric of “foreign policy.” Two years after Winthrop’s speech, President James Polk signed the Organic Act on August 14, 1848, thereby creating the Oregon Territory. This was a reflex of Manifest Destiny, legitimizing territorial expansion. In his speech, the article that Winthrop had alluded to, where Manifest Destiny was championed, had appeared only a week before, also addressing the “Oregon question” as part of a national debate:

Our legal title to Oregon, so far as law exists for such rights, is perfect. There is no doubt of this. . . . [W]e have a still better title than any that can ever be constructed out of all these antiquated materials of old black-letter international law. Away, away with all these cobweb tissues of rights of discovery, exploration, settlement, continuity, etc. . . . And that claim is *by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent* which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us. . . . The God of nature and of nations has marked it for us; with His blessing we will firmly maintain the incontestable rights He has given, and fearlessly perform the high duties He has imposed.<sup>22</sup>

In this editorial, the “rights of discovery, exploration, settlement, continuity, etc.” are invoked, but these “rights” were not universal. They were the province of the Americans, whether nationally, ethnically, or racially defined. These rights were circumscribed. To state the obvious, they belonged exclusively to Euro-Americans, and not to the Native Americans. The enforcement of such rights by the “Americans” against the Native Americans necessarily deprived the latter of what the Declaration of Independence had, at least in theory, declared to be “inalienable.” And all this was done with the putative blessing of “the God of nature and of nations.” “Providence” had so decreed, it would seem. The “City upon a hill” became an “empire of right”—colonizing, Christianizing, and civilizing by might, in the name of these self-arrogated “rights.”

Let us now see how this doctrine was translated into American and world history. Mostafa Rejai, Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Miami

University, Ohio, provides this clear overview across the horizons of history, in which Manifest Destiny had a direct impact on the destiny of vast territories and their peoples:

Manifest destiny is going to refer, among other things, to the physical direction in which the country is going to be moving. Coming from the points we do, our natural direction of movement is toward the West. So, manifest destiny means, in the first place, that the new nation is bound to expand over the entire continent—and with it, the values of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness will spread from coast to coast. Later on, we will have such expressions as “from sea to shining sea” and “from the mountains, to the prairies, to the oceans” to capture this aspect of manifest destiny. So, the westward movement is manifest destiny in action. The frontier is manifest destiny in action. The purchase of Louisiana is manifest destiny in action. The annexation of California and Texas is manifest destiny in action.

Now, manifest destiny means much more. Having expanded over the entire continent, the new nation is bound to go across the seas. It is our preordained mission to go beyond the continent. Why? Because wherever we go, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness go with us. We have to bring the blessings of democracy to the less fortunate peoples of the world. Accordingly, the acquisitions of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, Hawaii, Alaska, and the Philippines—these are all manifest destiny in action.<sup>23</sup>

From this succinct epitome of the range and reach of Manifest Destiny, the reader now has a clear impression of its vast historical impact. Manifest Destiny may be thought of as the American doctrine of conquest, as the ideology of American expansionism. Its ideological underpinnings, although secular, have markedly religious antecedents. In other words, Manifest Destiny is a quasi-religious concept. Baldly put, it urged the conquest of North America (and beyond), as ordained by divine will.

In his monograph on the ideology of Manifest Destiny, Anders Stephanson<sup>24</sup> charts a trajectory of Manifest Destiny over the course of American history and connects this history with its ideological justifications. Disclaiming any attempt to define “the meaning of America,” Stephanson maintains that “manifest destiny is of signal importance in the way the United States came to understand itself in the world and still does.”<sup>25</sup> As the ideology of American nationalism, Manifest Destiny reflected America’s belief in a “providentially assigned role . . . to lead the world to new and better things.”<sup>26</sup> At the heart of this ideology lies “an apparent paradox: a particular (and particularly powerful) nationalism constituting itself not only as prophetic but also [as] universal.”<sup>27</sup> Manifest Destiny, which “crystallized most clearly in the moments of aggrandizement or intervention,”<sup>28</sup> provided Americans with “a tradition that created a sense of national place and direction in a variety of historical settings.”<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, the

expansionist wars against Mexico in the 1840s and Spain in the 1890s were direct outcomes of this ideology translated into national policy.

Manifest Destiny arose during the Revolutionary and Federalist periods, when the 13 colonies, in their quest to forge an independent union and to preserve its sense of national purpose, required an ideology that would provide a coherent rationale. Lacking the unifying ethnic and cultural heritage that already unified other nation-states, Americans needed “a set of simple symbols . . . that would distill the past and at the same time proclaim the future.”<sup>30</sup> In fashioning this sense of common heritage and purpose, a “peculiar fusion of providential and republican ideology that took place after the Revolution” emerged, imbuing the United States of America with a sense of divine mission.<sup>31</sup> Apart from acknowledged classical influences, Stephanson claims that “any genealogy . . . must begin with the religious sources.”<sup>32</sup> Although regional, New England Puritanism proved to be the key catalyst in the formation and formulation of a national ideology. In other words, the Puritans were the precursors of Manifest Destiny. Admixed with other ideological alloys, Stephanson asserts that “the invaluable Puritan matrix could be projected onto more recent bourgeois models of enlightenment and profit, generating a modern nationhood of process and mission.”<sup>33</sup>

Stephanson speaks of the “Jeffersonian Moment” as a critical turning point in the further development of Manifest Destiny. Expansionist aspirations—an agrarian vision in which the empire of liberty might enlarge—made territorial acquisition a necessity. This necessitated the infamous Indian Removal Act that triggered the Indian Wars, as America advanced its frontiers. Inevitably, this would lead to confrontation with European states as Americans overtook their colonial empires. Thus, the Jeffersonians’ “dynamism and ideology of national aggrandizement” became “emblematic of the nineteenth century.”<sup>34</sup> Over the course of the twentieth century, the United States developed to its current position as “world hegemon.”<sup>35</sup>

One of the presumptions of Manifest Destiny is that Protestantism is superior to Catholicism. This allowed a country that was overwhelmingly Protestant to pretextually invade and annex half of the territory of Mexico in the 1840s. The U.S.–Mexican War of 1846–1848 was a prime example of how Manifest Destiny was exploited as justification for conquest. In a 2001 dissertation, *Crusade and Conquest: Anti-Catholicism, Manifest Destiny, and the United States–Mexican War of 1846–1848*, John Christopher Pinheiro examines how anti-Catholic sentiment influenced public opinion regarding the war against Mexico. Pinheiro explores how, in the late 1830s and early 1840s, increased immigration and republican ideology allowed anti-Catholicism and nativism to fuse, with this result:

Contrary to their usual anti-immigrant rhetoric, nativists also supported the annexation of Mexico in its entirety in the name of Manifest Destiny, and for racist and anti-Catholic reasons. . . . Voicing their opinions

in republican language, many evangelicals saw the war as a Providential opportunity to evangelize Catholic Mexico with a “pure” gospel. To them, the Manifest Destiny of the United States included the spread of Protestantism as the necessary foundation of republican government. . . . Certain tenets of American republicanism were brought into play when the overwhelmingly Protestant United States waged war on Catholic Mexico. Located at the middle point in the growth of the antebellum anti-Catholic movement, the U.S.–Mexican War helped to hone the concept of American republicanism as an ideology that included Anglo-Saxonism and anti-Catholicism under the greater umbrella of Manifest Destiny.<sup>36</sup>

Succinctly put, Manifest Destiny allowed for the pretextual invasion and annexation of half of Mexico’s land mass in the 1846–1848 war: “Expressing a hegemonic faith in the racial, moral, religious, and cultural superiority of the United States, Manifest Destiny legitimized the occupation of adjacent territorial zones and therefore affected Mexico directly.”<sup>37</sup> Besides its anti-Catholic sentiment, Manifest Destiny entails a racial ideology as well. In *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*, Reginald Horsman characterizes Manifest Destiny as a “search for personal and national wealth” that was “put in terms of world progress, under the leadership of a supreme race.”<sup>38</sup>

## The “Curse of Ham” Myth

This is where the Protestant myth of America becomes overtly racial. Proslavery Americans tried their best to Christianize slavery. A favorite verse of Southern clergymen, for instance, was this: “Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal, knowing that ye also have a master in heaven.”<sup>39</sup> Even more influential was the biblical account of the “Curse of Ham.”<sup>40</sup> The verse, “Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers” (Genesis 9:25), was invoked as a proof text for Christian legitimization of slavery throughout the South. The “Curse of Ham” was also known as the “Curse of Canaan.” (Ham was Noah’s youngest son, and Canaan was one of Ham’s sons.) Canaan gets punished for Ham’s delict. Because Africans were considered to be descendants of Ham, they were fated to be slaves, so that logic goes. This foregone conclusion—this perverse interpretation of a biblical story—transmogrified the biblical account into a racialized American Protestant myth.

This story played a prominent role in proslavery rhetoric. It theologically sanctioned slavery by means of a racialized exegesis of the biblical account of Noah, who planted a vineyard, got drunk, and was seen naked by one of his three sons, Ham, whom Noah then cursed. The immediate irony here is that Christianity stands for salvation—in justifying the sinner before God through the economy of Christ’s redemptive work. Unfortunately,

institutional Christianity (primarily in the Southern States), in order to justify slavery, found a powerful argument in favor of slavery in the Curse of Ham myth.

For much of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries in the Christian West, in fact, the Curse of Ham was the foremost religious theory for making sense of racial differences within humanity. In fact, it served as the central religious justification of the “peculiar institution” of chattel slavery in America. Because one of Ham’s descendants, Cush, was black (Genesis 10:6–14), the “Curse of Ham” has been interpreted racially in order to legitimate the slavery of people of African origin.

That is where a Bible story, racially interpreted, was transmogrified into a racial myth of polygenesis that gained almost universal assent among white nineteenth-century American Protestants.<sup>41</sup> In its treatment of the relationship of Noah’s three sons—Japheth, Shem, Ham—the Curse of Ham myth provided the typology by which race relations among the three racial groups that Noah’s three sons, respectively, represented (Caucasian, Asian, and African descent) could be differentiated and regulated. As one historian observes: “These relations were unsurprisingly a mirror of contemporary relations in 19th century—whites were dominant, indigenous peoples were marginalized, and blacks were subjugated.”<sup>42</sup>

Protestant Americans were certainly not alone in reading race into scripture. Exponents of racial exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam exercised their influence in providing scriptural warrant for racial doctrines.<sup>43</sup> The “Curse of Ham”/“Curse of Canaan” refers to the following passage of scripture in the book of *Genesis*:

The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was peopled. Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father’s nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, “Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers.”<sup>44</sup>

After the Flood, Noah planted a vineyard, became drunk, and lay naked in his tent. The drunkenness and nakedness of Noah thus occasioned the violation by Ham. Ham’s sin is that he beheld his father’s nakedness. While Noah’s other two sons (Shem and Japheth) were careful to avert their eyes, Ham gazed upon his drunken father’s body—a shameful act that triggered Noah’s curse: “Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers.” Note that it is not Ham who is cursed, but rather his son, Canaan, who

is fated to perpetual slavery, as is his progeny. Nor is there any mention of skin color, as David Goldenberg points out: "This biblical story has been the single greatest justification for Black slavery for more than a thousand years. It is a strange justification indeed, for there is no reference in it to Blacks at all."<sup>45</sup>

The association with Blacks came later, as chronicled in David Goldenberg's masterful survey, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*.<sup>46</sup> For our purposes, what matters is how this biblical understanding affected American history. Etymology begat etiology: "Ham" commonly came to mean "hot," "burnt," "swarthy," "dark," and "black." In the popular conception of it, the received meaning of "Ham" clearly pointed to Africa as the "hot" clime that produced the "black" race. Nothing could be more obvious, it would seem. Both in the North and in the South, Ham was universally regarded as the progenitor of black Africans: "In a study of the mythic world of the antebellum South vis-à-vis Blacks," Goldenberg explains, ". . . the notion of Blacks as 'the children of Ham' was a well-entrenched belief."<sup>47</sup> In nineteenth-century America, the sheer ubiquitousness of what came to be a commonplace assumption supports this conclusion, which can be stated with confidence: "It didn't matter whether one supported the institution of Black slavery or not, or whether one was Black or not; everyone in nineteenth-century America seemed to believe in the truth of Ham's blackness."<sup>48</sup> As pervasive as the Curse of Ham myth was in the nineteenth century, it persisted well into the twentieth century: "The Curse of Ham was commonly taught and believed in America up to recent times."<sup>49</sup> And so the myth of Canaan, as cursed by God with black skin, took root as a widespread religious myth of America. Its importance and pivotal influence cannot be overemphasized, a fact that Goldenberg accentuates:

As the Black slave trade moved to England and then America, the Curse of Ham moved with it. . . . There can be no denying the fact, however, that the Curse made its most harmful appearance in America, and there can be no denying the central role it played in sustaining the slave system. It was the ideological cornerstone for the justification of Black slavery, "the major argument in the proslavery arsenal of biblical texts," "certainly among the most popular defenses of slavery if not the most popular." Its place in American thought of the time was succinctly described in 1862 by Alexander Crummel, a man born in the United States to freed slaves. In a learned article he refers to "the opinion that the sufferings and the slavery of the Negro race are the consequence of the curse of Noah" as a "general, almost universal, opinion in the Christian world."<sup>50</sup>

Proslavery ideologues saw slaves as depraved by nature, since Ham, as the ancestor of Africans, embodied the debased character that drew Noah's wrath. Notwithstanding, Blacks withstood. Blacks took exception

to American exceptionalism by means of reactionary Black anti-exceptionalism, or what one scholar has dubbed “double exceptionalism.”<sup>51</sup> As a bulwark against the Curse of Ham, African Americans framed counter-myths that conveyed a covert theology of liberation from oppression.

## The African American Exodus Counter-Myth

Within Protestant Christianity itself, African Americans developed their own religious visions of America that served as viable alternatives to the white Protestant myths that helped rationalize and reinforce institutionalized racism in America, from slavery forward. Eddie S. Glaude notes that “religious myths remain central to the making of a new African American self and the location of that self in history.”<sup>52</sup> While he does not use the term “counter-myth,” Glaude clearly has the idea of a counter-myth in mind when he further observes:

African American religious myths deployed in the struggles against white supremacy have produced particularly charged conceptions of history, identity, and memory (which range across the political spectrum). . . . But many uses of religious myths among African Americans reject identification with America. This rejection begins with a basic reconfiguration of historical beginnings that makes possible the construction of an identity that stands over and against “the idea of America.”<sup>53</sup>

The preeminent African American counter-myth is the *Exodus* story. This is the subject of a 2007 dissertation, the information provided by which cannot be recapitulated here.<sup>54</sup> In brief, *Exodus* chronicles Israel’s entrance into Egypt, liberation from slavery, and settlement in the Promised Land of Canaan. This biblical narrative contained the seeds of a theology of liberation. Once it was introduced to American slaves, they immediately recognized a parallel to their own plight, and seized upon it as a source of inspiration and hope for their own freedom from oppression:

Exodus functioned as an archetypal myth for the slaves. The sacred history of God’s liberation of his people would be or was being reenacted in the American South. A white Union Army chaplain working among freedmen in Decatur, Alabama, commented disapprovingly on the slaves’ fascination with Exodus: “There is no part of the Bible with which they are so familiar as the story of the deliverance of Israel. Moses is their *ideal* of all that is high, and noble, and perfect, in man. I think they have been accustomed to regard Christ not so much in the light of a spiritual Deliverer, as that of a second Moses who would eventually lead them out of their prison-house of bondage.”<sup>55</sup>



In this alternative religious myth of America, America is not “God’s New Israel,” as so many white Protestants, as far back as the Puritans, believed. Under its racial interpretation by Black slaves, America was the new oppressor. It was Egypt reenacted. Under the Exodus myth, therefore, America’s mythic role is reversed. In “African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel,” Albert J. Raboteau explains this reversal of Biblical imagery:

No single story captures more clearly the distinctiveness of African-American Christianity than that of the Exodus. From the earliest days of colonization, white Christians had represented their journey across the Atlantic to America as the exodus of a New Israel; slaves identified themselves as the Old Israel, suffering bondage under a new Pharaoh.<sup>56</sup>

Out of the Exodus story, two divergent American religious myths emerged: a White Exodus narrative and a Black Exodus story. Each told a different history. The first was the Puritans’ escape from religious oppression to find religious freedom; the second was the struggle of African Americans to escape the oppression at the hands of the Puritans’ descendants. A prime example of this motif is the dialect poem, “An Ante-Bellum Sermon” (1895), by African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906)—excerpts from which will give the reader a fair impression of how the Exodus narrative was analogized to the new Egypt, America:

#### AN ANTE-BELLUM SERMON

We is gathahed hyeah, my brothahs,  
In di howlin’ wildaness,  
Fu’ to speak some words o comfo’t  
to each othah in distress.  
An’ we choose fu’ ouah subjic’  
Dis—we’ll ‘splain it by an’ by;  
“An’ de Lawd said, “Moses, Moses,”  
An’ de man said, Hyeah am I’.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Now ole Pher’oh, down in Egypt  
Was de wuss man evah bo’n,  
An’ he had de Hebrew chillun  
Down dah wukin’ in his co’n;  
‘Twell de Lawd got tiahed o’ his foolin’,  
an’ sez he: “I’ll let him know’  
Look hyeah, Moses, go tell Pher’oh  
Fu’ to let dem chillun go.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“An’ ef he refuse do it,  
I will make him rue de houah,  
fu’ I’ll empty down on Egypt  
All de vials of my powah.”  
Yes, he did—an’ Pher’oh’s ahmy  
Wasn’t wurth a ha’f a dime;  
Fu’ de Lawd will he’p his chillum,  
You kin trust him evah time.

\*\*\*\*\*

An’ you’ enemies may ‘sail you  
In de back an’ in de front;  
But de Lawd is all aroun’ you,  
Fu’ to ba’ de battle’s brunt.  
Dey kin fo’ge yo’ chains an’ shackles  
F’om de mountains to de sea;  
But de Lawd will sen’ some Moses  
Fu’ to set his chilun free.

\*\*\*\*\*

An’ de lan’ shall hyeah his thundah,  
Lak a blas’ f’om Gab’el’s ho’n,  
Fu’ de Lawd of hosts is mighty  
When he girds his ahmor on.  
But fu’ feah some one mistakes me,  
I will pause right hyeah to say,  
Dat I’m still a-preachin’ ancient,  
I ain’t talkin’ bout to-day.

\*\*\*\*\*

But I tell you, fellah christuns,  
Things’ll happen mighty strange;  
Now, de Lawd done dis fu’ Isrul,  
An’ his ways don’t nevah change,  
An’ de love he showed to Isrul  
Wasn’t all on Isrul spent;  
Now don’t run an’ tell yo’ mastahs  
Dat I’s preachin’ discontent.

\*\*\*\*\*

'Cause I isn't; I'se a-judgin'  
Bible people by dier ac's;  
I'se a-givin' you de Scriptuah,  
I'se a-handin' you de fac's.  
Cose ole Pher'or b'lieved in slav'ry,  
But de Lawd he let him see,  
Dat de people he put bref in,  
Evah mothah's son was free.

\*\*\*\*\*

An' dah's othahs thinks lak Pher'or,  
But dey calls de Scriptuah liar,  
Fu' de Bible says "a servant  
Is worthy of his hire,"  
An' you cain't git roun' nor thoo dat,  
An' you cain't git ovah it,  
Fu' whatevah place you git in,  
Dis hyeah Bible too'll fit.

\*\*\*\*\*

So you see de Lawd's intention,  
Evah sence de worl' began,  
Was dat His almight freedom  
Should belong to evah man,  
But I think it would be bettah,  
Ef I'd pause agin to say,  
Dat I'm talkin' 'bout ouah freedom  
In a Bibleistic way.<sup>57</sup>

Dunbar skillfully recreates a sermon, just as it might have sounded like in the days of Black folk preachers during the time of slavery. Through subversive use of dialect, Dunbar's preacher is a master of double entendre—the art of saying one thing and meaning another. The preacher invokes the past to address the present. After providing a detailed literary interpretation of this poem, David T. Shannon offers "An Ante-bellum Sermon" as an exemplar of African American hermeneutics:

The early African American sermons, of which Dunbar's poetic rendition is a remarkable remembrance, make a significant contribution to the development of an African American hermeneutic in several ways. They address the issues of (1) *contextuality*, (2) *correlation*, (3) *confrontation*, and (4) *consolation*, which, argues, are four significant modes of African American biblical interpretation.<sup>58</sup>

The Exodus myth is the leading example of African American counter-myths of America. Like this sermon, the destiny of African Americans is to expose Manifest Destiny for what it really is—a religious pretext for naked greed. The blessing of African Americans, moreover, is to counter the “Curse of Ham.” This dialectic of religious myth and counter-myth is a dynamic that pervades religious myths of America generally, as part of a long and arduous struggle to overcome the past. In Chapter 1, it was suggested that the “central themes” of American religious history are pluralism, Puritanism, and the encounter of black and white.<sup>59</sup> In a sense, all three themes are interrelated. Puritanism, largely through the encounter of black and white, embarked on a tortuous, historic path that is leading to a healthy diversity unified by a grand sense of overarching pluralism. The encounter of black and white will prove to be a major theme in the religious myths and visions of America to follow.

*Postscript:* The present writer has taken seriously the advice of reviewer, Richard Kyle. In his otherwise positive review of *Religious Myths and Visions of America*, Professor Kyle offered a fair criticism that the first edition of this book had neglected the “Religious Right”:

Currently, the greatest influence of Puritanism may be on evangelical Protestantism, especially the Religious Right. Evangelicals evidence a conflicting view of America. On one hand, they push American “exceptionalism” and have “sacralized” many aspects of American culture (for example, its political and economic systems). On the other hand, they lament the loss of “Christian America” largely because of the nation’s permissive attitude toward sexual openness, homosexuality, and abortion.<sup>60</sup>

It seems appropriate, therefore, to add an entirely new chapter for this revised edition: “The Christian Right’s Myths and Visions of America.” Understanding that the Christian Right does not represent what Christians believe as a whole (although, to be fair, the Christian Right does represent a conservative evangelical perspective shared by a significant electorate), it makes sense to treat the Christian Right in a separate chapter, which immediately follows, as Chapter 4.

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Figure 4.1. "Sinking Liberty" by David Smith. (Photo courtesy of David Smith.)



## Chapter 4

# The Christian Right's Myths and Visions of America

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*America is not only a nation; America is a religious idea. . . . America and Americanism were shaped by Christianity, especially Puritan Christianity. Puritan Christianity was shaped by the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible. The idea that liberty, equality and democracy were ordained by God for all mankind, and that America is a new promised land richly blessed by and deeply indebted to God—that is Americanism.*

— David Gelernter (2007)<sup>1</sup>

*We cannot escape our destiny, nor should we try to do so. The leadership of the free world was thrust upon us two centuries ago in that little hall of Philadelphia. In the days following World War II, when the economic strength and power of America was all that stood between the world and the return to the dark ages, Pope Pius XII said, “The American people have a great genius for splendid and unselfish actions. Into the hands of America God has placed the destinies of an afflicted mankind.”*

*We are indeed, and we are today, the last best hope of man on earth.*

— Governor Ronald Reagan (1974)<sup>2</sup>

America. Last best hope of man on earth? Or a dying civilization? Can America be saved?

Enter the Christian Right, which burst onto the national scene during the presidency of Jimmy Carter, the 39th President of the United States (1976–1981). An evangelical social movement, the politics of the American Christian Right has been phenomenal. In 1979, Jerry Falwell, pastor of the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, launched the Moral Majority, which became a force to be reckoned with during the 1980 presidential campaign. This movement swept across grassroots America, catching the national media's attention. Buoyed by a groundswell of enthusiastic supporters, Falwell urged Christians to combat “secular humanism” by making their voices heard in Washington, DC. One mark of its remarkable

success is the fact that the Moral Majority registered some two million voters. Yet it did not succeed in significantly affecting policy. No substantive legislative achievements were gained.

Other evangelical leaders followed suit, encouraging Christian activism. For years, Falwell was the face of the Christian Right, until, after failing to pass the very legislation he had advocated for so long, the Moral Majority was disbanded in the late 1980s, and gave way to the Christian Coalition, which enjoyed wider public support. Yet, by the dramatic force of Falwell's example, the Christian Right demonstrated that religions can be major social actors, so long as their adherents are effectively organized and mobilized. Politically energized evangelicals, then and now, show how religion can play a key role in society—not only in national affairs, but in world affairs.<sup>3</sup>

The American “Christian Right” is an umbrella term for a politically active movement of conservative evangelical Christians and their organizations. Repudiating “Hollywood values,” the Christian Right—also known as the Religious Right—gained national prominence as a “public religion” with a conservative Christian agenda. The term, “Religious Right,” however, is broader. Within Christianity, the term extends to the Catholic Right and the Mormon Right as well. The term further widens to include faith-communities outside of the Christian spectrum as well. Historian Lee Marsden puts the Christian Right in an even fuller perspective:

The Christian Right are a subgroup of the Religious Right, which comprises conservative Christians including Protestant evangelicals, Pentecostals, charismatics, fundamentalists, Catholics, sects and cults, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Worldwide Unification Church (Moonies), and Christian Scientists. Socially conservative Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists would also be included in this wide-ranging definition. Only those Protestants and Catholics who are socially conservative and politically active are included in the Christian Right; this excludes the vast majority of members of mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches, where a more inclusive and tolerant social gospel is taught.<sup>4</sup>

According to Richard Kyle, author of *Evangelicalism: An Americanized Christianity*, the Christian Right strives to “sanctify America, legitimizing its form of government, economy, and military activities” in an “attempt to return America to its founding Christian principles.”<sup>5</sup> As expected, the political discourses of Christian conservatives are religiously grounded. “The Christian Right has effectively baptized its political ideology in the name of Christianity,” Kyle explains.<sup>6</sup> So what is the political ideology of the Christian Right?

Francis A. Schaeffer (1912–1984) is widely acclaimed as the “father of the Christian Right.” A prime intellectual and spiritual mover behind

the meteoric rise of the new Christian Right as a political force, Schaeffer persuaded Jerry Falwell (d. 2007) to get politically active—thus making Schaeffer the philosopher of Falwell's "Moral Majority" organization. This was a key step in the emergence of the Christian Right. By setting the tone and agenda for evangelical Christians, his book, *A Christian Manifesto* (1981),<sup>7</sup> practically became the other bible of the Christian Right. Schaeffer constructed a formidable intellectual framework in support of Christianity as a totalizing faith. He saw America as being founded on Christian principles:

We must not confuse the Kingdom of God with our country. To say it another way: "We should not wrap Christianity in our national flag." None of this, however, changes the fact that the United States was founded upon a Christian consensus, nor that we today should bring Judeo-Christian principles into play in regard to government. But that is very different from a theocracy in name or in fact.<sup>8</sup>

Schaeffer argued that, while Christianity once held sway in America, "secular humanism" and hedonism now prevail. Christians needed to reassert their faith in such a way as to become the salt of American culture, and as a moral bedrock of American values. Schaeffer effectively transformed evangelical Christian atavism into activism.

The 1980s witnessed the emergence of James Dobson's Focus on the Family and Gary Bauer's Family Research Council, which merged in 1988. In more recent American history, these politically engaged, conservative Protestants arose to become a formidable new force in American politics. A case-in-point is President Ronald Reagan, who epitomized the success of the Christian Right, mediated by the Republican Party. The concerted efforts of the Christian Right in lobbying American policymakers were extraordinarily effective. The triumphs of the Christian Right at the ballot box, however, did not always translate into accomplishing the conservative agenda. But rather than dwelling on politics—being in constant flux—this chapter will focus principally on the Christian Right's myths and visions of America, expressive of the movement's moral and political agenda.

Generally, the Christian Right believes in "an inerrant Bible, the necessity of a conversion, America's Christian heritage, and the divinely sanctioned political and economic systems" of America.<sup>9</sup> According to Kyle, "evangelicals have 'baptized' America's political and economic systems, as they have sanctified many aspects of American culture."<sup>10</sup> Previously, the old Christian Right believed that "America's rise to power both economically and politically" in the 19th century "was part of God's design to civilize, Americanize, and Christianize the world."<sup>11</sup> Vestiges of this conviction can be discerned, subliminally, in new Christian Right ideology—so much so that, in the late 20th century, "the idea of a Christian America has become an article of faith with many evangelicals," according to Kyle.<sup>12</sup> The old Christian Right were

“not politically active from 1930 to 1970 in part because they did not have to be.”<sup>13</sup> But, in the wake of *Roe v. Wade* (1973), abortion, homosexuality, pornography and other issues spurred evangelicals into political action.<sup>14</sup>

The new Christian Right, as a movement, believes in a Christian America. The Christian Right strives to restore a Bible-based moral order to America. Secular humanism stands in the way, and threatens to thwart, undo, and overturn the very values on which this country was historically based. Secular humanism, from the perspective of the Christian Right, undermines America’s Christian heritage on a number of fronts.

The hot-button issues? The movers and shakers of the Christian Right proposed a school prayer amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and advocated teaching creationism in public schools (as an alternative theory to evolution). The Christian Right had also opposed the proposed Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s. They agitated against abortion, gay rights, pornography, busing and quotas, high taxes, business regulation, illegal immigration, feminism, and environmentalism. As champions of laissez-faire capitalism, moral discipline and heterosexual family values (especially the federal *Defense of Marriage Act*), the Christian Right remains a formidable political force today.

## Paradoxes Inherent in the Christian Right

Although galvanized and unified around core values and key political commitments, the Christian Right exhibits some key paradoxes. As a populist, grassroots movement, the Christian Right vested its political fortunes in the Republican Party. But this was not always the case historically. Richard Kyle point out other paradoxes as well: Christian Right partisans (1) were politically inactive in the past (before 1975), politically active in the present;<sup>15</sup> (2) registered mainly as Democrats (before 1980), yet most registered Republicans after 1980;<sup>16</sup> (3) advocated less governmental control over the economy, yet lobbied for more control over morality in public and private spheres;<sup>17</sup> (4) championed equal rights for women in the 19th century, yet opposed the Equal Rights Amendment in the 20th century;<sup>18</sup> and (5) are somewhat preoccupied with the end of the world (premillennialist), yet engage in political activism (postmillennialist).<sup>19</sup>

A comment on this fifth paradox: conservative Christians have viewed the United Nations as the nucleus of an imminent “New World Order.” Because of this, the apocalypse is seen to be all the more imminent. The sinister specter of economic and military centralization is a prelude to the apocalypse. The Antichrist will take over the world in a one-world dictatorship. And so the Christian Right often casts its views on America in apocalyptic terms. In *Apocalyptic Fever: End-Time Prophecies in Modern America*, Kyle elaborates on this last paradox:

Evangelicalism has manifested a number of paradoxes but one concern is its preoccupation with the end of the world and its political activism. Conservative Protestants are largely premillennialists and believe that they are living at the end of time. They interpret many events, especially those in the Middle East, as pointing toward the return of Christ. Still, they are determined to remake America according to Christian principles. In doing so, they act as if the end is not in sight, and they behave like postmillennialists.<sup>20</sup>

Yet the Christian Right also has an international vision. “The American culture wars are going global,” writes Jennifer S. Butler, author of *Born Again: The Christian Right Globalized*.<sup>21</sup> Advocacy at the United Nations is one forum where the Christian Right has partly succeeded in dominating certain global forums by forming alliances among evangelicals, conservative Roman Catholics, and Mormons, who are among those “*organizations and leaders that mobilize key constituencies to a conservative social agenda motivated by religious values.*”<sup>22</sup> For some of these organizations, the United Nations is now their preferred forum in which to lobby their causes. Butler notes “the international, interracial, and interfaith character of this new group of activists.”<sup>23</sup> In 2013, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), identified the following NGOs as “Influential Religious Actors”:

- (1) *Evangelical*: Alliance Defending Freedom; American Family Association; Concerned Women for America (CWA); Family Research Council (FRC); Focus on the Family (FOF)—to which list may be added the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), and the Eagle Forum;
- (2) *Catholic*: American Life League; Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute (C-FAM); The Holy See; Human Life International; Population Research Institute;
- (3) *Mormon*: Family Watch International; United Families International; World Family Policy Centre;
- (4) *Cross-faith*: Doha International Institute for Family and Development; Howard Center for Family, Religion and Society/World Congress of Families; National Right to Life Committee; International Youth Coalition.<sup>24</sup>

These groups mainly lobby for pro-life and family values over against so-called “sexual and reproductive health and rights” (SRHR) policies at the UN and at the World Congress of Families. The coalition aims to exert its influence and eventually shape social policy at the United Nations (UN).<sup>25</sup> Considering that the Christian Right is notorious for its “antiglobalism,” this might seem counterintuitive. Yet the Christian Right embraces the international arena as a forum for conservative social change.

Given the Holy See's special status as permanent observer state to the General Assembly, the Vatican is seen by Christian conservatives as a key ally.<sup>26</sup> The Vatican, in fact, serves as a role model for all NGOs promoting religious values at the UN. Yet Norad reports that, in the SRHR arena, the most influential conservative religious NGOs at the UN are Christian and American.<sup>27</sup> Norad further notes that "conservative Christian activists came to the UN with an explicit negative agenda aiming at weakening and ultimately ending UN influence on America."<sup>28</sup> Their "appeal to national sovereignty," Norad goes on to say, "serves to associate the UN with unpatriotic, destructive forces—socialism, feminism and environmentalism—that threaten to infiltrate America."<sup>29</sup>

American religious nationalism can, and often does, easily branch out into American religious internationalism. Just as the Christian Right has a national vision, it also has an international vision, if only to broaden its fight against "global liberal agenda" as the natural extension of its campaign against "secular liberalism" on American soil. Since the Christian Right perceives the world to be in an anti-Christian spiral, the "culture wars" in the United States practically become a "clash of civilizations" on a world scale—not as between countries, but as between competing worldviews. It is in this sense that the Christian Right is an international actor, with its main global concerns being women's rights, children's rights and population policy in the context of world politics. This brings us to the Christian Right's myths of America.

## The Antichrist/Rapture Myth

Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) was America's (and the world's) top nonfiction best-seller of the 1970s. Lindsey predicted that the world would come to an end around 1988. Later, Tim LaHaye, co-author of the "end times" *Left Behind* thrillers, became bestsellers in America. A popular groundswell of belief in the "rapture" among evangelical Christians was sufficient to suspend disbelief in these otherwise incredible narratives. Evangelicals generally believe that Christians are living in the "Great Parenthesis" of time between the Christ's resurrection and the secret "rapture" upon Christ's premillennial return, the "End of Days."<sup>30</sup>

Along with the Book of Revelation, this apocalyptic scenario is primarily based on literal interpretations of 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17: "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (KJV). This reading holds that faithful Christians will, suddenly and physically, be caught up in the air, "in the twinkling of an eye," when Christ appears at the end of time to do battle with the Antichrist at Armageddon.

(A related scripture is I Corinthians 15:51–54.) In their reading of the Book of Revelation, evangelical “premillenarians” interpret the “Declaration of Establishment of State of Israel” on May 14, 1948, as a sign from God—a messianic portent—that Christ’s Return is imminent.

That the Rapture was imminent did not mean that Christians should not be engaged in combatting the pernicious influence of “secular humanism.” On Jerry Falwell’s talk show *Listen America*, Timothy LaHaye raised a Christian battle-cry against secular humanism: “We’re in a religious war and we need to aggressively oppose secular humanism; these people are as religiously motivated as we are and they are filled with the devil.”<sup>31</sup> Leadership and activism are needed for moral combat. From this perspective, the salvation of America is at stake.

Only a brief mention of this Christian myth is made here, since America does not figure prominently. The Bible was written long before America was discovered. So it is not possible to find any explicit mention of America in scripture. Any reference to America in the Bible must therefore come by way of interpretation. One notable example of those who read “America” into prophecy is Paul McGuire, author of a 2013 book, *A Prophecy of the Future of America*.<sup>32</sup> McGuire hosted the conservative, nationally syndicated “Paul McGuire Show.” McGuire interviewed such political figures as former President Jimmy Carter, Senator John McCain, various Secretaries of State and Pentagon officials, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, PLO leaders and generals in the Israeli Defense Forces, as well as such conservative Christian celebrities and evangelical luminaries as Oliver North, Rick Warren, Joel Rosenberg, Tim LaHaye, Dr. James Dobson, and Ann Coulter.<sup>33</sup>

Since “America” is nowhere to be found in the Bible explicitly, how does McGuire interpret a scriptural reference to “America” implicitly? The trick is to identify America with “Babylon.” Interpreting “Babylon” as a metonym (word substitute) for “America” is a common interpretive technique among evangelical writers who purport to give us a glimpse into the near future, culminating in Armageddon. On balance, these doom-and-gloom books tend to present America as having abandoned its Christian roots, which is the root cause of the social calamities that America faces today.

From its lofty calling, America has fallen. Yet, the Rapture is not so much a religious myth of America that is *about* America, but a religious myth that many American evangelicals actually believe. Writers and film producers saw “a pattern emerge in world events that they believed matched Bible prophetic passages,” as signs and portents that the apocalypse was on the event horizon.<sup>34</sup> “This view of future events,” Harder goes on to say, would “help shape the agenda of the Christian Right.”<sup>35</sup> How did American premillennialism accomplish this?

One immediate impact of American dispensationalism was the rise of evangelical “Christian Zionism,” i.e. which holds that support for the State of Israel is vital to America’s national well-being and prosperity. Marsden defines “Christian Zionism” (which predates Jewish Zionism), so:

Christian Zionism teaches that human history can be divided into seven time periods or dispensations from the Garden of Eden (a literal belief in creationism) through to the Second Coming of Jesus. According to such beliefs, we are now in the end times of the sixth dispensation awaiting the Second Coming of Jesus. Crucial to the return of Christ is a series of biblical prophecies that are to be fulfilled centring on the State of Israel and fulfilment of the Great Commission to take the gospel into the entire world. The creation of the State of Israel in 1948, the conquest of the West Bank and reunification of Jerusalem are considered signs that Christ's return is imminent. Christian Zionists believe that America, and indeed the world, will be judged according to their dealings with Israel. In such thinking, Genesis 12:3 refers to the blessings and curses of God being dependent upon how people treat the Jewish people: if America blesses (stands up for and supports) Israel, then God will bless America; if it does not, then America will suffer.<sup>36</sup>

Here, America figures in the Apocalypse, although not centrally. From the perspective of Christian Zionists—now under the leadership of Pastor John C. Hagee and the Christians United for Israel (CUFI)—America still has time to attract divine favor for its support of Israel, or at least to mitigate end-times judgment.

Another foreign-policy influence on the part of the Christian Right is manifested in hard-line stances towards the Soviet Union. But the most important impact on the agenda of the Christian Right is nicely summarized by Harder:

Thus, by the end of the 1970s, a number of evangelical and fundamentalist writers had contributed to a certain view of America's future and its past. In their view, their nation had a righteous past and an ominous future. Founded on godly principles, the nation had fallen away from its high calling, largely due to the corruption of secular humanism. And the storm clouds of Armageddon were gathering, giving their thinking a renewed urgency.

This thinking coalesced into an ideology in which political activism, not just evangelism, was seen as the way forward. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, several writers were suggesting that while the Great Tribulation was inevitable, perhaps America could escape—and even mitigate—the effects of the “pretribulation tribulation” that secular humanism was sure to create. The chronology of the end times, in their view, was certain, even if the date of the beginning of the end was unknown. But in the meantime, before the rapture, American Christians could act to restore the nation to its purported godly heritage, allowing it to once again be “a city on a hill.”<sup>37</sup>

Reclaiming America as a “Christian nation” in its origins and pointing to America's mission and destiny as a “City upon a Hill” provided a



bedrock of belief on which to base the moral and political agenda of the Christian Right.

## The “Christian Nation” Myth

Is America a “Christian nation”? That depends on which Christian perspective is considered.

The ideology of the Christian Right is essentially an expression of Christian Americanism, which promotes a nationalized gospel with a political theology. Such theology begins and ends—and rises and falls—with the myth of America as a “Christian nation” or a “Christian America.” In his 2014 Ph.D. dissertation, Joseph Harder sums up the Christian Right’s vision of America as a Christian nation quite nicely:

Nevertheless, the ideology of the Christian Right was not entirely amorphous, and a number of its components can be identified. First and perhaps most important was the belief that America had a special relationship with God. Different Christian Right activists phrased this in different ways—that America had a “covenant” with God, that it was founded by “godly men” upon “godly principles,” that it was a “Christian nation”—but all shared this sort of religious exceptionalism. It is difficult to overstate the power of this version of American history for the Christian Right, for it provided both inspiration of and justification for political activism. Asserting America’s “Christian roots” was more than simply an observation about America’s past; it was also a mandate for the nation to “return to God.”<sup>38</sup>

This Protestant reading of the Bible—this “vision of America’s mythic religious past”<sup>39</sup>—is not basic to Christianity globally, but is a special phenomenon of conservative Christianity in America. Protestants in America—from the Pilgrims to the present—have borrowed the concept of “Israel” and transferred it to America as the “New Israel.” In popular Christian culture within the United States today, America, in its pristine origins, is seen as a “Christian nation,” harking back to the Founding Fathers. Yet, somewhere along the way, America lost its true path to fulfilling its destiny as a Christian nation.

The arguments for a “Christian America” have been summarized by John Wilsey, Assistant Professor of History and Christian Apologetics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Houston, Texas, who is also an evangelical Christian:

Thirteen historical, philosophical, and theological themes, appearing predominately in the Christian America literature since 1977, are surveyed in order to set the stage for the critique. These themes include:

from an historical perspective: (1) the Christian faith of the founders; (2) the Christian character of the sources drawn from by the founders; (3) the Christian character of colonial documents and early state constitutions; (4) the Christian character of early colleges; and (5) the powerful Christian influence of the Great Awakening and radical Whig ideology on the revolutionary generation. From a philosophical perspective: (6) the original intent of the founders may be accurately discerned by applying the same evangelical hermeneutical method as used when interpreting Scripture; (7) the original intent of the founders was to build Christianity into the heart of the nation; and (8) the role of the Enlightenment is not as significant as the role of Christianity in the founding. And from a theological perspective: (9) a providential view of history; (10) American exceptionalism as evidence of God's unique blessing on the nation; (11) America as God's chosen nation, a new Israel; (12) liberty as a biblical notion finding its consummate application in the civic life of America; and (13) the Bible as the primary source of the founding national documents. Finally, the commonly held belief among all the Christian America works surveyed is that America must recover its Christian heritage from a culture that is drifting deeper into secularism.<sup>40</sup>

Here's a six-part argument against the Christian America myth, offered by Wilsey:

The critique follows six lines of argument: (1) the Christian America thesis is ambiguous on the definition of "Christian nation"; (2) the Christian America thesis is ambiguous in defining the contours of the Enlightenment; (3) the Protestant consensus, which was predominant in America from its founding until the early twentieth century, is no more; (4) religious pluralism was the intent behind the First Amendment, and it dominates contemporary American culture; (5) the Bible is not the primary source of the American founding; and (6) American exceptionalism, while significant to the Christian America argument, is not sustainable theologically or historically.<sup>41</sup>

Part and parcel of the belief in America as a "Christian nation"—advocated by the Christian Right with an evangelistic impulse—is what Marsden calls the "secularization of this American gospel" on which "the American Creed, American Civil Religion and American Exceptionalism" is based. The first of these three pillars of the "American Gospel" is the "American Creed," which is "an ideological commitment to the democratic, legal and individualistic principles enshrined in the American Constitution, Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence."<sup>42</sup> The "American Creed" embraces, *inter alia*, "belief in liberty, egalitarianism (of opportunity rather than outcome), individualism, populism and laissez-faire."<sup>43</sup>

The second pillar of the “American Gospel” is the “American Civil Religion,” which seeks to unify Americans of all persuasions around a core of shared values of the American Creed. “American Civil Religion” comprises four elements: (1) belief in a Supreme Being; (2) a conviction that Americans are favored by God; (3) Americans have a divine mission to do good throughout the world; and (4) national ceremonies are suffused with religious symbols and allusions that “assume a religious aura and perform religious functions” in what may be characterized as “a hybrid faith that is undergirded by an exceptionalism which contends that the United States was chosen by God to fulfil a unique role in the world.”<sup>44</sup> Whenever the “Star-Spangled Banner” is patriotically sung, or the “Pledge of Allegiance” is recited, such convictions are reinforced.

“American Exceptionalism,” the third pillar of the “American Gospel,” is underscored by a sense of international responsibility that Providence is calling upon America to promote democracy and freedom worldwide.

## The “City Upon A Hill” Myth

America as a “Christian nation” is linked with the idea that America is also a “City upon a Hill.”

John Winthrop’s biblical (Matthew 5:14) “City upon a Hill” metaphor (from his 1630 sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity”) is at the heart of America’s evolving national identity. Intertwined with other motifs—such as “God’s New Israel”—the Christian Right invokes this motif to elevate America to the status of God’s favored nation. As a result, this national myth has become part of America’s civil religion.

No public figure has used the “City upon a Hill” metaphor to greater effect than Ronald Reagan. A staunch ally of the new Christian Right, President Ronald Reagan has, a dozen times—most notably in 1974, as governor of California<sup>45</sup> and 1989, as President of the United States—invoked John Winthrop’s phrase to hold up America as a model society to which the eyes of the world should turn. On January 11, 1989, President Ronald Reagan, speaking from the White House, concluded his “Farewell Address to the Nation” with these memorable words:

The past few days when I’ve been at that window upstairs, I’ve thought a bit of the “shining city upon a hill.” The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an early Pilgrim, an early freedom man. He journeyed here on what today we’d call a little wooden boat; and like the other Pilgrims, he was looking for a home that would be free.

I’ve spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don’t know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed,

and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still.

And how stands the city on this winter night? More prosperous, more secure, and happier than it was 8 years ago. But more than that: After 200 years, two centuries, she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what storm. And she's still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home. . . .

And so, goodbye, God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.<sup>46</sup>

Reagan was an ally of the Christian Right. Reagan opposed abortion, supported school prayer, and, in the rhetoric of binary, black-and-white discourse, famously vilified the Soviet Union as the “evil empire.” Yet, true to his office as President, his use of “God bless” was universal, transcending dogma and ideology alike.

Historian Richard Gamble, in his book, *In Search of the City on a Hill: The Making and Unmaking of an American Myth* (2012), shows how this catalytic catchphrase—the “City upon a Hill,” which launched a thousand ship-of-state speeches—“helped make America what it is today” as well as “how America helped make the metaphor what it never was.”<sup>47</sup> The last chapter conveys Gamble's parting message, a call to renounce national idolatry:

Christians owe a proper degree of allegiance to their nation. Christians ought to love their earthly home with well-ordered affections. But they must be on guard against idolatry in whatever form it takes. . . . In Christian theology, it is simply not true that America is the city on the hill, not now, not ever. To seek to protect America from this falsehood is not to do her any dishonor. Quite the opposite. It spares her from delusion. Proper love refuses to cooperate with the effort to divinize America.<sup>48</sup>

No need to throw out the baby with the bathwater here. Whatever the “City upon a Hill” originally may (or may not) have meant bear little direct relationship to what it may mean to the Christian Right now. For it is a live metaphor, and no amount of historical revisionism will ever shake the faith of American evangelicals in this ideal characterization of America's world role as an exemplar nation.

## **The Christian Right's Positive Visions of America**

The Christian Right's vision of America is all-embracing as it is ambitious. In Kyle's description of it, the Christian Right has a paradoxical relationship

to America, reacting against “liberal” trends, while idealizing conservative Christian values as inherently American:

In the political arena, the evangelical paradox runs deep. On one hand, the very birth pangs of Christian Right can be seen in its resistance to modern cultural trends—secular humanism, feminism, abortion on demand, gay rights, homosexuality, liberalism, and an expanded government. In this sense, the Christian Right is truly a counter-cultural movement. On the other hand, few religious bodies have Americanized the Christian faith as have conservative Protestants. You name it, they have Christianized it—America’s heritage, democracy, market economy, foreign policy, military involvement, and great wealth. In baptizing America’s political and economic systems, evangelicals tend to blur the distinctions between conservative religion and politics. They are seen as one and the same. Conservative political celebrities are often regarded as evangelical Christians, despite a life style that might call such a conclusion into question.<sup>49</sup>

“You name it, they have Christianized it,” pretty much sums up the Christian Right’s vision of America, where the line between piety and politics is blurred, if not obliterated. “Democratic and Christian values are compatible,” Kyle further observes, “and they are so intertwined that they are often confused.”<sup>50</sup> God and country, from the perspective of the Christian Right, is where church and state should be united, not separated. Separation of church and state exists institutionally, but not morally. The strength of the nation requires moral fiber. America’s destiny demands it. Otherwise, America will pay the price for rejecting God’s will. Politics involves a moral choice, which is why constituents of the Christian Right may be described as “values voters.”

## **The Christian Right’s Negative Visions of America**

The Christian Right has sometimes resorted to alarmism as a strategy to get its message across to the American public, where fear of the Apocalypse can instill a repentant “fear of God” for evangelistic purposes. For instance, in 2011, Patrick J. Buchanan (popularly known as “Pat Buchanan,”) published *Suicide of a Superpower: Will America Survive to 2025?*—a foreboding vision of things to come. If America continues on its current course, a path to perdition may follow:

When the faith dies, the culture dies, the civilization dies, the people die. That is the progression. And as the faith that gave birth to the West is dying in the West, . . . we are in the Indian summer of our civilization. Historian Arnold Toynbee wrote, “Civilizations die from suicide, not by

murder.” And so it is. We are the Prodigal Sons who squandered their inheritance; but unlike the Prodigal Son, we can’t go home again.<sup>51</sup>

These are dire forecasts, to be sure. *Suicide of a Superpower* is a message of doom and gloom. The Redeemer Nation cannot save the world if it cannot save itself. In a certain sense, the message of doom and gloom, on a collective level, is really one of repentance and forgiveness, on an individual level. Evangelism, and the righteousness of Christian morality itself, is never far behind the political activism of the Christian Right.

## The Christian Right: Conclusions

In *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs* (2006), former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, now a professor of foreign affairs at Georgetown University, acknowledges the right of the Christian Right to advocate their moral and political agenda. “Articulating moral principles is what movements to establish international norms are in business to do,” Albright observes. “That is precisely how military aggression, slavery, piracy, torture, religious persecution, and racial discrimination have come to be outlawed.”<sup>52</sup> In the foreign policy arena, however, Marsden sees the influence of the Christian Right as having a detrimental effect:

The Christian Right have enjoyed success during the Bush years. However, their influence is damaging to U.S. interests in the short, medium and long term: by placing America against egalitarian progress in international forums; preventing measures designed to improve women’s health, protect children and provide equality to homosexuals; by allying themselves with reactionary and human rights-abusing governments around the world to support policies that restrict women’s right to control their reproductive health; by placing the health of people, mainly in the developing world, at risk by restricting access to abortion and sex education; by banning stem-cell research designed to find cures for life-threatening illnesses; and by withholding condoms, the most effective weapon in the war against HIV/AIDS.<sup>53</sup>

Not only are the international implications of the Christian Right’s agenda problematic as to what might be characterized as its moral (i.e. sexual) agenda, so also are environmental and religious issues of concern, as Marsden goes on to explain:

Christian Right denial of the anthropogenic causation of global warming continues to put the world at risk of environmental disaster by reducing pressure on the U.S. government to cooperate with the international community and accept mandatory reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

Conservative evangelicals have led support for going to war and maintaining the occupation in Iraq. The Islamophobia expressed by leaders of the Christian Right reveals a deep-seated antipathy towards the Muslim world and seeks to identify Islam, rather than radical Islam, as America's enemy. The Christian Right's proselytizing in the Muslim world, evangelization within the U.S. military, and criticism of Muhammad and of Islam as a religion of peace, and unequivocal support for Israel despite its appalling treatment of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories—all create the impression within the Muslim world that America is leading a crusade against them.<sup>54</sup>

The Christian Right strives to preserve traditional American values, which are appreciated as Judeo-Christian values. They are seen as one and the same. To abandon the one is to forsake the other. The Christian Right's myths of America bolster their corresponding visions of America. Myths serve as rhetoric, and operate as code words for the Christian Right's values-based moral vision of America. According to Harder, the rise of the Christian Right "saw an updating of the Christian nationalist myth, resulting in a new effort to put it into political service."<sup>55</sup> For the Christian Right, "America is a Christian nation in which patriotism is next to godliness."<sup>56</sup>

Such patriotism is no mere flag-waving, however. Far from it. The Christian Right has exerted considerable influence in recent American elections. Despite a poor track record in successfully prosecuting its moral agenda, the Christian Right, off and on, has impacted American foreign policy in defining America's world role. This is no small undertaking. The Christian Right continues to be a force to be reckoned with, in advance of the Day of Reckoning that is expected imminently.

What is the future of the Christian Right? Daniel K. Williams, author of *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*, states that the "culture wars" are far from over, and continue into twenty-first century. Efforts by evangelicals use the Republican Party to promote a a religiously based code of morality for the good of society is expected to continue well into the future. Their previous attempts, for the most part, failed, according to Williams, "because the majority of Americans were unwilling to abandon the values of pluralism, tolerance, and egalitarianism."<sup>57</sup> Anecdotal illustrations of this very point that Williams is making can be seen in speeches that President Obama made in 2009 and earlier, in 2007. On April 6, 2009, speaking to the press from the Cankaya Palace in Ankara, Turkey, President Barack Obama, a self-professed Christian, privileged America's present-day pluralism over its Christian origins:

And I've said before that one of the great strengths of the United States is—although as I mentioned, we have a very large Christian population, we do not consider ourselves a Christian nation or a Jewish nation or a

Muslim nation; we consider ourselves a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values.”<sup>58</sup>

President Obama is a member of the United Church of Christ (UCC). And so it is no surprise that previously, on June 23, 2007, then-Senator Obama addressed a session of the UCC’s General Synod (celebrating the UCC’s 50th Anniversary) at the Civic Center in Hartford, Connecticut. Then-Senator Obama took the opportunity to witness to his own Christian faith. He also criticized the Christian Right:

So doing the Lord’s work is a thread that’s run through our politics since the very beginning. And it puts the lie to the notion that the separation of church and state in America means faith should have no role in public life. Imagine Lincoln’s Second Inaugural without its reference to “the judgments of the Lord.” Or King’s “I Have a Dream” speech without its reference to “all of God’s children.” Or President Kennedy’s Inaugural without the words, “here on Earth, God’s work must truly be our own.” At each of these junctures, by summoning a higher truth and embracing a universal faith, our leaders inspired ordinary people to achieve extraordinary things.

But somehow, somewhere along the way, faith stopped being used to bring us together and started being used to drive us apart. It got hijacked. Part of it’s because of the so-called leaders of the Christian Right, who’ve been all too eager to exploit what divides us. At every opportunity, they’ve told evangelical Christians that Democrats disrespect their values and dislike their Church, while suggesting to the rest of the country that religious Americans care only about issues like abortion and gay marriage; school prayer and intelligent design. There was even a time when the Christian Coalition determined that its number one legislative priority was tax cuts for the rich. I don’t know what Bible they’re reading, but it doesn’t jibe with my version.<sup>59</sup>

Here, Obama, speaking as a Christian as well as a politician, contrasts the Christian Right with “a higher truth and embracing a universal faith” that America’s leaders have publicly invoked. All along, Obama has consistently rejected the “Christian nation” myth. Predictably, media response to President Obama’s 2009 remarks in Ankara was mixed. But the policy enunciated by President Obama is clear: America is multicultural and therefore multi-faith. Religious values can be translated into secular ideals that can then be debated and decided in the civic sphere as matters of public discourse. “Conservative Christian leaders,” Williams concludes, “still have faith that, with the help of God and the Republican Party, they can restore a Christian moral order to the nation.”<sup>60</sup> For this to happen, it would appear that the Christian Right will need to find more common ground domestically, as it has strategically done internationally, especially at the United Nations.



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6. Kyle, *Evangelicalism: An Americanized Christianity*, 167.
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45. Governor Ronald Reagan, “We Will Be A City Upon A Hill” (January 25, 1974). First Conservative Political Action Conference. See [http://reagan2020.us/speeches/City\\_Upon\\_A\\_Hill.asp](http://reagan2020.us/speeches/City_Upon_A_Hill.asp). (Accessed November 13, 2014.) (2)
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  58. President Barack Obama, "Joint Press Availability with President Obama and President Gul of Turkey." (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Press Release, April 6, 2009). See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/joint-press-availability-with-president-obama-and-president-gul-turkey>. For the video, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIVd7YT0oWA>. (Accessed November 21, 2014.)
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*Figure 5.1.* National Cathedral, Washington, DC, July, 2007. “Washington National Cathedral is called to be a spiritual home for the nation. Vision Statement. The National Cathedral will be a catalyst for spiritual harmony in our nation, renewal in the churches, reconciliation among faiths, and compassion in our world.” See <http://www.cathedral.org/about/mission.shtml>. (Photo courtesy of David Smith.)

## CHAPTER 5

# Catholic Myths and Visions of America

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*Mr. President . . . I wish to extol the blessing and gifts that America has received from God and cultivated, and which have become the true values of the whole American experiment in the past two centuries. . . . The more powerful a nation is, the greater becomes its international responsibility, the greater also must be its commitment to the betterment of the lot of those whose very humanity is constantly being threatened by want and need. . . . America needs freedom to be herself and to fulfill her mission in the world.*

—John Paul II (1987)<sup>1</sup>

There is no official Catholic vision of America. But there almost was. It verged on heresy.

Given the diverse nature of “fissiparous Protestantism,”<sup>2</sup> there is no official Protestant vision of America. This is due, in large measure, to the lack of a central authority in Protestantism generally. Similarly, there is no official Catholic vision of America. But this is not for *lack* of a central authority, but because of the *presence* of it. The intervention of the papacy—the central authority of the Roman Catholic church—put an end to a movement known as the “Americanist controversy.”

The so-called Americanists argued that America has a divine destiny. William L. Portier, Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies of the University of Dayton, provides one of the clearest introductions as to who the Americanists were, and how the Americanists’ vision of America relates back to that of the Puritans, and eventually to the “mythical” belief in “American exceptionalism” that is part of the American Protestant legacy:

Many of us live in the United States of America. Looking back to John Winthrop’s fateful identification of the new land and covenanted people with the gospel “City upon a Hill,” there has been a strong tendency for

citizens of the United States to sacralize their country, to see it as chosen by God. . . . This mythical contrast often plays out politically and historically in “American exceptionalism,” a fervent belief in the virtuous uniqueness of our political institutions and way of life.<sup>3</sup>

The key players in promoting this proposed Catholic belief—Orestes Brownson, Isaac Hecker, John Ireland and James Gibbons, John A. Ryan, and John Courtney Murray—are introduced by Portier as follows:

This tendency to look upon our country as providential entered Catholic thought in the United States with Orestes Brownson. His 1855 essay, “Mission of America,” founds what is sometimes called the tradition of Catholic “Americanism” and gives classic expression to the notion that there is a providential fit between Catholicism and American institutions. Think of the heroes of American Catholic historiography. They are the heroes of the Catholic Americanist tradition: Isaac Hecker, John Ireland and James Gibbons, John A. Ryan, and John Courtney Murray. The idea that Catholics have what America needs has increasingly had its counterpart in the idea that the Church needs America to do its work in the world.<sup>4</sup>

As will be explained in more detail further in this chapter, the Americanists were nearly pronounced heretics by papal decree. On January 22, 1899, Pope Leo XIII (1810–1903) promulgated an encyclical, known as *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae*, addressed to “Our Beloved Son, James Cardinal Gibbons, Cardinal Priest of the Title *Sancta Maria, Beyond the Tiber*, Archbishop of Baltimore,” in which the Supreme Pontiff, towards the end of his encyclical, expresses this concern: “From the foregoing it is manifest, beloved son, that we are not able to give approval to those views which, in their collective sense, are called by some ‘Americanism’.”<sup>5</sup> Pope Leo XIII admonished Catholics, *inter alia*, to avoid (1) exalting “active” over “passive” virtues, (2) asserting the superiority of the “natural” to the “supernatural,” and (3) reducing the Catholic faith to the surrounding culture. These warnings of the doctrinally dangerous tendencies of Americanism having been authoritatively proclaimed, the advance of the Americanist movement was effectively halted. Thus, Catholic Americanism has often been called a “phantom heresy,” because it never developed to such an extent as to be branded an actual heresy. None of the Americanists was branded a “heretic.” The immediate threat of Americanism was contained.

Yet certain features of Americanist beliefs regarding America’s world role and divine destiny have, in fact, been echoed approvingly in some remarkable papal statements regarding America. These later papal remarks, primarily diplomatic in nature, have accorded America with extraordinary recognition. For this reason, one may begin with the most recent and relevant

papal disquisitions on America, and then hark back to the roots of this Catholic discussion of the destiny of America, which began, in earnest, with the writings of Orestes Brownson (1803–1876), then further developed by the Americanists themselves. In the several papal comments on America presented in the next section, the reader will note the purpose of these comments, which is, generally, to encourage American political leaders not to lose sight of America's potential and purpose in exercising its enormous influence in world affairs for the betterment of humanity.

## Papal Praise of America

Like dreams, some myths have the potential to become self-fulfilling—that is, capable of being actualized. Alive to America's vast potential, the Vatican has recently commented on America, in which the familiar rhetoric of America's mission and destiny is judiciously invoked for rhetorical effect. That approach, after all, is part and parcel of effective diplomacy. For instance, on Thursday, April 17, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI, speaking in the “Rotunda” Hall of the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center of Washington, D.C., had this to say about America:

Americans have always valued the ability to worship freely and in accordance with their conscience. Alexis de Tocqueville, the French historian and observer of American affairs, was fascinated with this aspect of the nation. He remarked that this is a country in which religion and freedom are “intimately linked” in contributing to a stable democracy that fosters social virtues and participation in the communal life of all its citizens. In urban areas, it is common for individuals from different cultural backgrounds and religions to engage with one another daily in commercial, social and educational settings. Today, in classrooms throughout the country, young Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and indeed children of all religions sit side-by-side, learning with one another and from one another. This diversity gives rise to new challenges that spark a deeper reflection on the core principles of a democratic society. May others take heart from your experience, realizing that a united society can indeed arise from a plurality of peoples—“*E pluribus unum*”: “out of many, one”—provided that all recognize religious liberty as a basic civil right.<sup>6</sup>

Note how the American secular value of religious freedom—one of the founding principles of America itself—is given religious approbation. Here, America is extolled as an exemplar that “others” should seek to emulate. Now, the American motto—“*E pluribus unum*”—is taken as a religiously approved maxim. This is consistent with previous papal statements. For instance, on Tuesday, January 27, 2004, Pope John Paul II received Vice

President Dick Cheney, who represented President George W. Bush. This is what Pope John Paul II had to say:

Mr. Vice President,

I am pleased to welcome you and your family to the Vatican and to receive the cordial greetings which you bring from President Bush. The American people have always cherished the fundamental values of freedom, justice and equality. In a world marked by conflict, injustice and division, *the human family needs to foster these values in its search for unity, peace and respect for the dignity of all.* I encourage you and your fellow-citizens to work, at home and abroad, *for the growth of international cooperation and solidarity in the service of that peace which is the deepest aspiration of all men and women.* Upon you and all the American people I cordially invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.<sup>7</sup>

What the 2008 and 2004 statements have in common is an implicit sense of America's mission to promote international peace and religious freedom as a "basic civil right" and as one of the "core principles of a democratic society." This mission is not America's alone, however. So, while America is singled out as exemplary in this noble endeavor, America is not given a special status. Thus, America is *exemplary*, but not *exceptional*. As one may see, it was any Catholic countenance of *American exceptionalism* to which the Vatican has taken *official exception*. Even so, Pope John Paul II has come close to recognizing some sense of America's spiritual destiny:

To everyone I repeat on this occasion what I said on that memorable day in 1979 when I arrived in Boston: "On my part I come to you—America—with sentiments of friendship, reverence and esteem. I come as one who already knows you and loves you, as one who wishes you to fulfill completely your noble destiny of service to the world." . . . And finally I come to join you as you celebrate the Bicentennial of that great document, the Constitution of the United States of America. I willingly join you in your prayer of thanksgiving to God for the providential way in which the Constitution has served the people of this nation for two centuries: for the union it has established, the tranquillity and peace it has ensured, the general welfare it has promoted, and the blessings of liberty it has secured.<sup>8</sup>

Note how the U.S. Constitution is praised as a "great document," and how "providential" was the way in which the Constitution had served to preserve the blessings of freedom for two centuries. Perhaps the fullest expression of papal praise of America was occasioned on the visit of Pope John Paul II to Vizcaya Museum, Miami, on Thursday, September 10, 1987, where he addressed President Ronald Reagan. Highlights of this extraordinary view of America, from the supreme authority of the Catholic church itself, are as follows:



Mr. President,

1. . . . In addressing you I express *my own deep respect for the constitutional structure of this democracy*, . . . I willingly pay honour to the United States for what she has accomplished for her own people, for all those whom she has embraced in a cultural creativity and welcomed into an indivisible national unity, according to her own motto: *E pluribus unum*. . . . Also today, I wish to extol the blessing and gifts that America has received from God and cultivated, and which have become *the true values of the whole American experiment* in the past two centuries.
2. For all of you this is a special hour in your history: the celebration of *the Bicentennial of your Constitution*. It is a time to recognize the meaning of that document and to reflect on important aspects of the constitutionalism that produced it. It is a time to recall the original American political faith with its appeal to the sovereignty of God. To celebrate the origin of the United States is to *stress those moral and spiritual principles, those ethical concerns that influenced your Founding Fathers* and have been incorporated into the experience of America. . . .
3. *Among the many admirable values of this nation* there is one that stands out in particular. It is freedom. *An experience in ordered freedom is truly a cherished part of the history of this land*. This is the freedom that America is called to live and guard and to transmit. She is called to exercise it in such a way that it will also benefit the cause of freedom in other nations and among other peoples. . . .

The effort to guard and perfect the gift of freedom must also include the relentless pursuit of truth. . . .

4. . . . In continuity with what I said to the President of the United States in 1979 I would now repeat: "Attachment to human values and to ethical concerns, which have been a hallmark of the American people, must be situated, especially in the present context of the growing interdependence of peoples across the globe, within the framework of the view that the common good of society embraces not just the individual nation to which one belongs but the citizens of the whole world. . . . The more powerful a nation is, the greater becomes its international responsibility, the greater also must be its commitment to the betterment of the lot of those whose very humanity is constantly being threatened by want and need. . . .
5. . . . *America needs freedom to be herself and to fulfill her mission* in the world. . . . *A new birth of freedom is repeatedly necessary*: freedom to exercise responsibility and generosity, freedom to meet the challenge of serving humanity, the freedom necessary to fulfill human destiny, the freedom to live by truth, to defend it against whatever distorts and manipulates it, the freedom to observe God's

law—which is the supreme standard of all human liberty—the freedom to live as children of God, secure and happy: *the freedom to be America* in that constitutional democracy which was conceived to be “one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”<sup>9</sup>

The reader should note that these papal remarks are not binding pronouncements. They are not issued *ex cathedra* (“from the chair” [of St. Peter]); that is, these statements are not binding upon Catholics. Like a Supreme Court ruling, these statements are merely *dicta*, not *decisions*. Similarly, these papal remarks are *dicta*, not *doctrine*. Still, papal comments on America are significant (to American Catholics, at least), yet do not rise to the threshold of a full-blown American exceptionalism.

## The Americanist Myth of America

America, some Catholics believe, has a destiny. But that is not the same thing as Manifest Destiny. This is a crucial distinction. There were American Catholic writers and leaders, however, who did hold to a view of Manifest Destiny. Among these was Orestes Brownson,<sup>10</sup> who was an avowed supporter of Manifest Destiny.

In 1844, after a spiritual odyssey, Orestes Brownson converted to Catholicism. Prior to his conversion, Brownson had been, in turn, a Presbyterian, a Universalist, and agnostic Unitarian, a world-reformer, and a Transcendentalist.<sup>11</sup> From 1844 forward, Brownson’s renown was that of a Catholic public philosopher. A gifted writer, Brownson’s rhetorical style has been colorfully epitomized: “There is in Brownson’s style a rhetorical habit of using the harsh blow of a miner’s sledge when the tap of a carpenter’s hammer would be more effective.” Moreover, he had an “inclination to use a battle ax to crush a butterfly.”<sup>12</sup> Here is Brownson’s most well-known statement on Manifest Destiny:

There is more than meets the eye in the popular expression, “Manifest Destiny.” We have a manifest destiny, and the world sees and confesses it, some with fear and some with hope; but it is not precisely that supposed by our journalists, or pretended by our filibusterers,—although these filibusters may be unconsciously and unintentionally preparing for its fulfillment. It may be our manifest destiny to extend our government over the whole American continent, but that is in itself alone a small affair, and no worthy object of true American ambition. . . . The manifest destiny of this country is something far higher, nobler, and more spiritual,—the realization, we should say, of the Christian ideal of society for both the Old World and the New.<sup>13</sup>

This unabashed support for Manifest Destiny did not reflect an official Catholic stance. Although Brownson was arguably the most influential Catholic philosopher of his era, his views were fairly idiosyncratic—some of them even extravagant. Moreover, Brownson did not represent a school of thought within the Catholic communion. Rather, he was a splendid individualist. Like his pre-Catholic peregrinations, Brownson's religious and political views were in a constant state of flux. For that reason, he is occasionally referred to in scholarly literature as a "weathervane."<sup>14</sup> Brownson's inclusion in this chapter is principally because he provides something of a bridge, or transition, to the Americanists, who were definitely a group representing what might well be regarded as a "school of thought," as it were. Orestes Brownson is significant because he was the immediate ideological precursor of the Americanists and had a direct influence on Archbishop John Ireland (1838–1918) of Baltimore, one of the principal leaders of the Americanist movement.

Brownson's view of Manifest Destiny, it should be added, cannot be reduced to specious patriotic jingoism, for it had a decidedly Catholic dimension to it. His essay, "The Mission of America," can be best understood if one attaches the word "Catholic" to it. Thus, the "Catholic" mission of America is for Americans to discover in Catholic values the highest expression of American ideals. In fine, the mission of America, as professed by Orestes Brownson, was its Catholic role in reforming civilization throughout the world. And herein lies a key to several of the other religious visions of America presented in this book: To understand what the "mission of America" is—from any particular religious perspective (that is, if America is generally regarded in a positive light)—one simply has to add that religion's name before the phrase, "mission of America," whether that mission may reflect a Baha'i, Buddhist, Mormon, or other religiously nuanced vision of America. In his major work on America, *The American Republic* (1866),<sup>15</sup> Orestes Brownson speaks of the political separation of church and state operationally, but of the necessity of the fusion of church and state at the level of principle:

But the United States have a religious as well as a political destiny, for religion and politics go together. Church and state, as governments, are separate indeed, but the principles on which the state is founded have their origin and ground in the spiritual order—in the principles revealed or affirmed by religion—and are inseparable from them. There is no state without God, any more than there is a church without Christ or the Incarnation. An atheist may be a politician, but if there were no God there could be no politics. Theological principles are the basis of political principles. . . . The effect of this mission of our country fully realized, would be to harmonize church and state, religion and politics, not by absorbing either in the other, or by obliterating the natural distinction between them, but by conforming both to the real or Divine order, which is supreme and immutable.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, in Brownson's view, America can fulfill its "Catholic" mission by becoming more "catholic" in promoting a secular application of religious principles. One would think that, to a lesser degree at least, other countries could contribute, each in its own way, to this larger sense of humanitarian and divine mission—that is, of "Providence, or God operating through historical facts."<sup>17</sup> Not so:

Of all the states or colonies on this continent, the American Republic alone has a destiny, or the ability to add any thing to the civilization of the race. Canada and the other British Provinces, Mexico and Central America, Columbia and Brazil, and the rest of the South American States, might be absorbed in the United States without being missed by the civilized world. They represent no idea, and the work of civilization could go on without them as well as with them. If they keep up with the progress of civilization, it is all that can be expected of them.<sup>18</sup>

It is undoubtedly such parochial provincialism that the Catholic church found so unacceptable, with respect to the tendencies of the later "Americanists" who were the ideological heirs of Orestes Brownson. This leads us to ask, what is "Americanism" in the American Catholic context—considering the fact that Brownson was the great precursor to the Americanist movement, although not one of the principals themselves? The simplest explanation is that the Americanists, following in Brownson's ideological footsteps, believed in "God and country"—that is, that America has a divine destiny, and that, together, the alliance of America and Catholicism would redound to the advancement of both. To this end, the Americanists sought rapport between Catholicism and America. The Americanists held that a harmony—potentially, if not essentially—exists between American values and Catholic ideals. Even more than striking a harmony, the ultimate goal of the Americanists was that Catholicism might prove to be a catalyst in America's mission to reform civilization.

What largely precipitated the Americanist controversy was the influence of the vehemently and violently anti-Catholic "Know-Nothings." Antipathy to Catholicism traces back to the Reformation. Reflecting the bias prevalent in mother England, anti-Catholic sentiments were transferred from Europe to America during the course of colonization of the New World. Anti-Catholicism persisted in America on the false assumption by many Protestants who assumed that Catholic loyalty to Rome undermined democracy. Around 1850 Charles B. Allen founded the Order of the Star Spangled Banner. This was a secret society bent on wresting political power away from immigrants and inflicting reprisals on those elected officials who catered to Catholics. By 1854, this secret order became more commonly known as the "Know-Nothing Party" or "American Party." This order was responsible for a surge of nativist, anti-Catholic rhetoric and concomitant violence.

Largely in response to the national pandemic of anti-Catholic sentiment aimed at the Irish and other Catholic immigrants, the Americanists argued that the principles of American democracy were compatible with Catholic doctrines and that Catholicism could, and should, provide strong support for the Republic. Americanists sought a rapprochement between the Roman Catholic church and American culture. They championed religious freedom, praised democracy, and saw the separation of church and state in a positive light. The Americanists favored accommodation, and encouraged Catholic immigrants to learn English and adopt American cultural values. The Americanists supported labor unions as institutions promoting social justice for workers, and recommended that Catholics align their educational institutions with American models.

Who were the acknowledged leaders of the Americanist movement? First and foremost is James Cardinal Gibbons, Archbishop of Baltimore. “Cardinal” was not his middle name, but rather reflects the fact that, on June 7, 1886, Gibbons was elevated to the position of a cardinal, the second American so honored. Gibbons was the leader of the Americanist hierarchy, which included, *inter alia*, the following prelates: Archbishop John Ireland, of St. Paul, Minnesota; Bishop John Keane, of Richmond, Virginia, and later the first rector of the Catholic University; Monsignor Denis O’Connell, rector of the North American College in Rome; and John Lancaster Spalding of Peoria.<sup>19</sup> These ecclesial and intellectual leaders of the American Catholic church made reconciliation with the America’s political principles—particularly that of religious freedom—a priority. As such, the Americanists, although unsuccessful in the short run, were a catalyst in the Americanization of Catholic doctrine, especially in the furtherance of progressive social ideals.

One prime example of this rapprochement between Catholicism and progressive American social ideals will illustrate. John Ireland, who was the first archbishop of St. Paul, Minnesota, delivered his famous address, “The Catholic Church and Civil Society,” on Monday, November 10, 1884, before the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, in which he proclaimed:

Republic of America, . . . Thou bearest in thy hands the brightest hopes of the human race. God’s mission to thee is to show to nations that man is capable of the highest liberty. . . . *Esto perpetua!* . . . [N]o hands will be lifted up stronger and more willing to defend, in war and peace, thy laws and institutions than Catholic hands. *Esto perpetua!*<sup>20</sup>

Beyond these noble aspirations and lofty sentiments, what principles were the Americanists trying to promote? And to what extent, one may ask, were Catholic ethical and moral teachings and American social principles found to be congruent? What cross-fertilization did the Americanists envision? While there is no definitive “creed” of the Americanist platform, the principal Americanist beliefs can be distilled from the leading speeches and essays of the Americanists themselves. In fine, what was the Americanist

myth of America? In answer to this question, John Ireland is not of much help, beyond general asseverations that Catholic values are compatible with American ideals. One prime example of this will suffice to exemplify the point. In his essay, "The Church in America," Ireland writes:

The Church of America has the world-wide duties which the world-wide influence of the American Republic has thrust upon it. Wherever goes the flag of America, wherever go the power and prestige of America, there should the Church of America be known, there should its influence for good be felt and recognized. A special mission of the Catholic Church in America will always be to demonstrate how congenial is the freedom of democracy to the religion of Christ, how naturally from the teachings of Christ's Gospel proceed the principles of democracy liberty, equality and brotherhood. It is because of this special mission that the American Catholic Church is so anxiously watched by thinking men all over the world. Humanity is entering upon a new phase of its social and political history. To what degree will the Church of nineteen centuries find itself at home in this new world? It is to the American Church to give the answer.<sup>21</sup>

One is hard put to find a definitive expression of the Americanist agenda. It is largely a set of platitudes with little substance, and of diffuse principles with little real application. Americanism is a Catholic apologetic that largely failed.

## **Papal Responses to the Americanist Myth of America**

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Pope Leo XIII officially condemned Americanism in his apostolic letter, *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae: Concerning New Opinions, Virtue, Nature And Grace, With Regard To Americanism*, issued on January 22, 1899) and addressed to Cardinal James Gibbons (1834–1921) of Baltimore:

From the foregoing it is manifest, beloved son, that we are not able to give approval to those views which, in their collective sense, are called by some "Americanism." But if by this name are to be understood certain endowments of mind which belong to the American people, just as other characteristics belong to various other nations, and if, moreover, by it is designated your political condition and the laws and customs by which you are governed, there is no reason to take exception to the name. But if this is to be so understood that the doctrines which have been adverted to above are not only indicated, but exalted, there can be no manner of doubt that our venerable brethren, the bishops of America, would be the first to repudiate and condemn it as being most injurious to themselves

and to their country. For it would give rise to the suspicion that there are among you some who conceive and would have the Church in America to be different from what it is in the rest of the world.<sup>22</sup>

In instant obedience to Pope Leo XIII's decree, James Gibbons, on St. Patrick's Day, 1899, publicly renounced "Americanism" as named and characterized in the encyclical: "This doctrine, which I deliberately call extravagant and absurd, this Americanism as it is called, has nothing in common with the views, aspirations, doctrine and conduct of Americans."<sup>23</sup> Does this mean that Cardinal Gibbons repudiated his own personal views, or simply the caricature of "Americanism" was delineated in *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae*?

In keeping with the spirit of this encyclical, later pontiffs were careful to praise "certain endowments of mind which belong to the American people" while eschewing any temptation to elevate America's endowments—along with whatever mission and destiny America might have in God's plan, as it were—to the status of some kind of special doctrinal position and prerogative.

As suggested in the beginning of this chapter, the Vatican, while having officially rejected Americanism as a doctrine,<sup>24</sup> has accorded great significance to certain aspects of that doctrine. In the American Catholic context, the legacy of Americanism is of both historical importance and contemporary relevance. This is seen in later papal pronouncements on America and democracy—without endorsing Americanism—indicating that America still has a special purpose in the divine scheme of things, even though a theology of America has no place in official Catholic doctrine. On December 16, 1997, for instance, Pope John Paul II officially stated that America "carries a weighty and far-reaching responsibility, not only for the well-being of its own people, but for the development and destiny of peoples throughout the world." Yet "the continuing success of American democracy," the Pontiff added, "depends on . . . a free society with liberty and justice for all . . . if the United States is to fulfill the destiny to which the Founders pledged their 'lives . . . fortunes . . . and sacred honor'."<sup>25</sup>

## Can the Americanist Myth of America Become a Reality?

Can a vision, if well-defined and if possible to act upon, be realized? Can the Catholic Americanist myth of America become a reality? Whether phantom heresy or cherished hope, can this dream become true, even if partially? To what degree are Catholic aspirations for America even possible? These questions invite contemporary Catholic reflections on the moral compass of America, on what direction America should follow, on what future course it should track, and on how Catholic values might serve as a guide.

Can a Catholic vision of America be defined? To this end, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's *A Moral Vision of America* affords a prime exemplar.<sup>26</sup> Archbishop of Chicago from 1982 to 1996 after having served as archbishop

of Cincinnati from 1972 to 1982, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin (1928–1996) was promoted to cardinal by Pope John Paul II in 1983 and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1996. For some 20 years, Cardinal Bernardin was the most influential U.S. Catholic bishop. In *A Moral Vision of America*, Bernardin develops his central theme, a “consistent ethic of life.” This is a comprehensive ethical system, a moral framework that structures and unifies his vision of America, which is really Cardinal Bernardin’s Catholic vision for the world. Although it is one man’s vision, it is probably shared by a great number of Catholics. Without recapitulating his views on such controversial topics as abortion and capital punishment, Cardinal Bernardin has contributed enormously to clarifying and promoting his moral vision for America.

Another noteworthy Catholic commentary on America is John Courtney Murray’s 1960 collection of essays, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, and reprinted by Georgetown University Press in 2005.<sup>27</sup> When this book first appeared, Father Murray (1904–1967) himself was pictured on the cover of the December 12, 1960, issue of *Time* magazine, in a portrait drawn by artist Boris Chaliapin.<sup>28</sup> This *Time* piece, a cover feature story, could truly be called a “Catholic moment” in the Catholic impact on America. In the “Critical Introduction,” Peter Lawler characterizes Father Murray’s book as “one of two astute and comprehensive books written by American Catholic citizens about their country.” “The other great Catholic book on America written by an American Catholic,” Lawler adds, “is Orestes Brownson’s *The American Republic* (1866).”<sup>29</sup>

*Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* is not a simplistic, flag-waving paean to America by a Catholic leader. “The Catholic may not, as others do,” writes Father Murray in his preface, “merge his religious and his patriotic faith, or submerge one in the other.”<sup>30</sup> For Catholicism itself is far more historic and universal than America itself: “He must reckon with his own tradition of thought, which is wider and deeper than any that America has elaborated.”<sup>31</sup> Murray’s primary “message,” as it were, is that Catholic values are harmonious with American ideals. This evades the real issue as to whether the Catholic church actually has, or can exert, any appreciable influence on the course of American thought and culture itself.

Retrospectively, however, Catholic visions of America have failed to have much decisive impact. The rhetoric was there, but not the results, according to Catholic sociologist Joseph Varacalli. In *Bright Promise, Failed Community* (2000), Varacalli explains why Catholic America essentially failed to shape the American Republic in any significant way.<sup>32</sup> Varacalli’s concluding chapter is disappointing, however, being the afterthought of just one single page in this very short book.<sup>33</sup> One has to look elsewhere for a more forward-looking perspective. Prospectively, in an article that appeared in the Catholic popular journal, *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* in 2004, and reprinted in *Ignatius Insight* in May 2005, Varacalli elaborates further on the analysis he presented in *Bright Promise, Failed Community*, but with a view to the future of Catholicism



in America. Varacalli articulates this vision in the following 12 “Propositions and Principles,” which the present writer distills as follows:

*Proposition One:* Patriotic sentiments are principally realized at the level of the nation; such patriotism may soon be mediated through a kind of globalism. Either way, the key question is how Catholic citizens should relate to America.

*Proposition Two:* It is “idolatrous,” however, to exalt a national interest above a religious concern. That is to say, faithful adherence to the practice of the Catholic religion must take precedence: “For all of its virtues, America is, at best, a means to some higher end such as human liberty,” Varacalli states.

*Proposition Three:* Varacalli hastens to add that patriotism, per se, is neutral: “Patriotism, in and by itself, is neither good nor bad; the issue is the nature of what one is patriotic towards.” Accordingly, a good Catholic must develop a healthy patriotism and not be “patriotic” for its own sake. For, to do so, would be tantamount to a blind patriotism. One should not be patriotic merely for the sake of patriotism.

*Proposition Four:* American society is in flux. Since the “America” that is the focus of our patriotism is constantly changing, therefore our own patriotism has to be adjusted accordingly.

*Proposition Five:* Its precipitous moral decline notwithstanding, Varacalli believes that, “all things considered, this country was a better place to live in fifty years or so ago.”

*Proposition Six:* From a Catholic perspective, America is positive and negative.

*Proposition Seven:* The natural consequence of Proposition Six is that a Catholic view of America must be realistic, and must mediate between idealizing America, on the one extreme, and belonging to the “America hating club,” on the other: “Fairness, realism, and the Catholic worldview, then, should acknowledge the ambiguous cultural reality of the present situation in the United States,” Varacalli writes.

*Proposition Eight:* In many ways, this proposition is the key to Varacalli’s Catholic vision of America, where “the possibility of reversing this society’s descent into the culture of death or, conversely, building a society based on love and human solidarity depends on the implementation in American society of ideas either derived from, or consistent with, Catholic social teachings.” From his own perspective as a devout Catholic, Varacalli’s vision of America, in his own words, essentially boils down to this:

The Catholic defense of the fundamental dignity of all human life, including the unborn; its positing of truth and the exercise of reason; its promotion of the intact, nuclear, traditional family; its insistence that the purpose of government is to serve the common good; its position that workers and employees have the right to organize for a decent spiritual and material existence; its claim that creative and dignified work is constitutive of the anthropology of mankind; and its argument that the

true development of nations and individual lives involves the furthering of both body and soul, are just a few examples of what I've referred to as the "bright promise" contained within Catholic social thought and the natural law. Simply put, the saving and further perfection of the American experiment lies primarily with the ability of the Catholic Church to serve as a leaven for our society and culture. Put another way, and translated into the central concern of my presentation, a great way to be a patriotic American is to be a serious, educated, and committed Catholic American.

*Proposition Nine:* Realistically, the Catholic Church in America is not currently positioned or equipped "to effectively lead the restoration of American society and culture," Varacalli admits. "As I've argued in my book, *Bright Promise, Failed Community: Catholics and the American Public Order*," Varacalli explains, "the Catholic Church in the United States has suffered a massive 'secularization from within' during the post-Vatican II era." In other words, the American Catholic church has, unfortunately,

allowed itself to be co-opted by corrupting secular influences, thus losing her ability not only to serve as a leaven for our society and culture but also her ability to evangelize her own community of slightly less than twenty-five percent of the American population. Simply put, the Church can't save America if she can't first save herself.

*Proposition Ten:* Given this critique, Varacalli advances what may well be considered his American Catholic manifesto: "The first task for the Catholic Church, then, is to restore integrity to the Catholic house through an intensive emphasis on authentic Catholic evangelization, catechesis, socialization, and education. In the language of sociology, the Catholic Church must rebuild its 'plausibility structure' or series of social institutions" in order to effectively regain any kind of measurable influence on American society.

*Proposition Eleven:* "The keys to creating and sustaining an orthodox Catholic institution capable both of socializing effectively its members and evangelizing successfully outside its walls is," Varacalli proposes, (1) maintaining the Catholic tradition "in all its majesty and sophistication"; (2) maintaining "high standards of professionalism and competence"; and (3) "reinforcing communication and social interaction." "Simply put," Varacalli proposes, American Catholics should "invest less time with American mass culture and more time in an authentically Catholic milieu."

*Proposition Twelve:* Finally, Varacalli exhorts American Catholics, in words of Jesus, to be "innocent as a dove and as wise as a serpent." Here, American Catholics need to look to contemporary role models. "One such role model," Varacalli proposes, "is Mel Gibson, whose film, *The Passion of the Christ*, represents a major victory for those who believe that Christians have a right to attempt to contribute and shape the contours of our culture and society." "Mel Gibson is a Christian who has made a difference in American

public life,” Varacalli explains, “by enriching it with the Gospel message. He is a true American patriot and a true Christian American.”

Varacalli concludes that “the simple and stark fact is that United States of America needs the Catholic worldview more than the Catholic faith requires the American experience.” The test of whether American Catholics have succeeded in their mission to positively influence America in realizing its own mission is simply this: “If this county of ours, which we love so much and which has done so much good for so many, is to escape further descent into the culture of death, it will be because of the presence, witness, and actions of a revitalized Catholic Church in the United States of America.”<sup>34</sup>

Can the Catholic Americanist myth of America become a reality? With the sexual abuse scandal having significantly undermined faith in the Catholic priesthood, and with America’s wider unmooring from the traditional harbors of morality, decency, and traditional American values, the answer to that question is likely this: Not on its own. Visions of America that can translate American ideals into reality will take other shapes and forms, as will be described throughout the remainder of this book. To the extent that a shared vision may be found, and common ground gained, the alternative visions of America that are most viable will probably be so because they reveal a grander vision.



*Figure 5.2.* Demon and angel praying. Queen of All Saints Parish Church (Roman Catholic) in Brooklyn, New York (July 2008). Angle of view rotated from horizontal to vertical for effect, as these figures extend parallel to the ground from the roof of the Cathedral. (Photo courtesy of David Smith.)

## Chapter 5 Update: Toward a Truly “Catholic” World

*The American people have a genius for splendid and unselfish action, and into the hands of America, God has placed the destinies of afflicted humanity.*

—Pope Pius XII (1946)<sup>35</sup>

In 1946, *Collier's* magazine published a special message to Americans by Pope Pius XII.

As of 2007, around 22% of Americans were professed Catholics; that's a small percentage of the single largest religious organization in the world, with over one billion adherents across the globe today. By name, and therefore by definition, the Roman Catholic Church is universal, which is the meaning of “catholic.” Presumably, the Pontiff, in this day and age, cannot show any preference to any given country. No favoritism toward any particular country can or should be shown. This is not so much a rule as it is an obvious fact. It's simply common sense. Whereas a country may exhibit certain extraordinary capacities and characteristics, a visiting Pope may take advantage of a golden opportunity to say some good things about the country, especially as a way to encourage the leaders and people of that country to aspire to greater accomplishments. If doing so serves a higher (and wider) purpose, then all the better. Accordingly, papal statements on America should be seen in this light.

Before looking at more recent papal statements on America, it would be worthwhile to focus briefly on a special message to America, given by Pope Pius XII, which was then published in a national magazine. Decades later, President Ronald Reagan would cite, verbatim, from this very statement. It was one of his favorite quotes, in fact. So an old statement was recycled and privileged later in a speech that attracted national press coverage, thereby giving these very words not only renewed, but possibly even greater national prominence. In some sense, the papal statement became a presidential statement. Put another way, a religious message became part of America's secular civil religion.

The article was titled, “Wisdom—Not Weapons of War: A Program for Permanent Peace.”<sup>36</sup> This remarkable statement was invited by Henry La Cossitt, editor of *Collier's*, a national weekly magazine. He did not ask Pope Pius XII directly. Instead, La Cossitt contacted Cardinal-designate, Francis J. Spellman, to convey his invitation to Pope Pius XII. In brief, the Pontiff had this to say about America:

The Church teaches that a sound democracy is based on the changeless, unchallengeable principles of natural law and revealed truth. . . .

In October, 1936, a transatlantic voyage afforded Us an opportunity of catching a glimpse with Our own eyes, of America, so young, so sturdy,

so glorious. The American people have a genius for splendid and unselfish action, and into the hands of America, God has placed the destinies of afflicted humanity. . . .

Armed with the arms of spirit and heart, the merciful weapons of peace: wisdom, justice and charity, we must stand united against the wanton weapons of war: tyranny, hatred and greed. Then the griefs of the world's bereaved and the graves of their martyred dead will be sealed with the tranquillity and the glory of God's peace.<sup>37</sup>

This statement would be resurrected some four decades later by President Ronald Reagan, in his "Farewell Address to the Nation," delivered from the Oval Office on January 11, 1989.<sup>38</sup> President Reagan's speech is briefly discussed in Chapter 4.

Fast-forward now to Pope Benedict XVI's 2008 visit to America. A visit outside the Vatican is typically called "apostolic voyage." In this sense, the word "voyage" should not be understood as an "adventure," but simply as a venturing forth—that is, a "visit." Papal visits to America have been ongoing for well over 50 years. On October 4, 1965, Pope Paul VI became the first pope to visit the United States. That day, he spent 14 hours in New York. He addressed the United Nations General Assembly, attended the New York World's Fair, celebrated Mass at Yankee Stadium, and met President Lyndon Johnson. Over a span of 20 years, from 1979 to 1999, Pope John Paul II visited the United States seven times during his papacy. In six of those occasions, the Pontiff met with a U.S. president. Before taking a brief look at the Pope Benedict XVI's sojourn to America, a short sketch of the Pontiff's life and career will provide a background.

Born 1927, Pope Benedict XVI was German theologian, Joseph Ratzinger. In 1947, Ratzinger on his graduate studies at the Herzogliches Georgianum of the Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich, a theological seminary. In July, 1953, Ratzinger was awarded his doctorate in theology. His dissertation was titled, "The People and House of God in Augustine's Doctrine of the Church." In 1958, Ratzinger became a professor of theology at Freising College, a little north of Munich. An academic in his role as a Catholic theologian, Ratzinger held positions as a Professor of Dogma and History of Dogma at the University of Bonn (1959–1963), the University of Münster (1963–1966), the University of Tübingen (1966–1969), and the University of Regensburg (1969–1977). In 1968, Ratzinger published (in the original German) perhaps his most celebrated book, *Introduction to Christianity* (English translation, 1969), since translated into nineteen languages, including Chinese and Arabic. His academic career ended when, on March 24, Pope Paul VI (1897–1978) made Ratzinger a cardinal and appointed him as Archbishop of Munich and Freising (1977–1981). In 1981, Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) named Ratzinger as cardinal prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This post made Ratzinger the chief overseer of Catholic doctrine.

Ratzinger reaffirmed traditional Catholic teachings on priestly celibacy, birth control, homosexuality, and other controversial issues, whereby American Catholics pressured the Vatican for change, and such efforts were interpreted as effectively challenging Rome's authority.<sup>39</sup>

On April 19, 2005, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger was elected Roman Pontiff, and he took the name Benedict XVI. In April 15–21, 2008, the the Holy Father undertook his “apostolic journey” to the United States for a six-day visit to Washington and New York. On April 18, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI gave a speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations. On Wednesday, April 16, 2008, in a welcoming ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington DC, the Pontiff addressed President George W. Bush and the American people. The Holy Father proclaimed, in part:

Mr. President,

From the dawn of the Republic, America's quest for freedom has been guided by the conviction that the principles governing political and social life are intimately linked to a moral order based on the dominion of God the Creator. The framers of this nation's founding documents drew upon this conviction when they proclaimed the “self-evident truth” that all men are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights grounded in the laws of nature and of nature's God. . . .

For well over a century, the United States of America has played an important role in the international community. . . . America has traditionally shown herself generous in meeting immediate human needs, fostering development and offering relief to the victims of natural catastrophes. I am confident that this concern for the greater human family will continue to find expression in support for the patient efforts of international diplomacy to resolve conflicts and promote progress. In this way, coming generations will be able to live in a world where truth, freedom and justice can flourish—a world where the God-given dignity and rights of every man, woman and child are cherished, protected and effectively advanced . . .

God bless America!<sup>40</sup>

This speech is noteworthy in calling attention to America's separation of church and state, historically demanded by the colonial churches themselves. American Catholics came to embrace this guarantee of the freedom of religion as an important legal protection. Of far greater moment, in the eyes of the Pontiff, was America's international outreach and diplomacy. Clearly, Pope Benedict XVI gave recognition to, and expressed appreciation for, America's concern for the protection of human rights abroad, and for playing its part in conflict resolution in the context of international relations. There is a hint of America's scientific contribution in the words “promote progress,” although that is simply the present writer's interpretation, as

“progress” is broadly defined. In praising America’s diplomatic and humanitarian virtues, the Pontiff has effectively endorsed America’s world role by calling for a continuation of these efforts in “coming generations.” The speech ends with a rhetorical flourish, closing with a benediction so familiar in presidential speeches, “God bless America!”

A week later, on Wednesday, April 30, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI spoke at St. Peter’s Square. He reflected on his experience in America. Translated from the Italian, the Pontiff stated, in part:

During the Meeting with the President at his residence, I was able to pay tribute to this great Country [America] which was built from the outset on the foundations of a felicitous combination of religious, ethical and political principles which still constitute a valid example of healthy secularism where the religious dimension, with the diversity of its expressions, is not only tolerated but appreciated as the Nation’s “soul” and a fundamental guarantee of human rights and duties. In this context, the Church can carry out her mission of evangelization and human promotion with freedom and commitment and also as a “critical conscience.” She thus contributes to building a society worthy of the human person and, at the same time, encourages a Country such as the United States—to which everyone looks as to one of the principal actors on the international stage—toward global solidarity, ever more necessary and urgent, and the patient exercise of dialogue in international relations.<sup>41</sup>

Here, America’s “healthy secularism” has a positive “religious dimension,” which not only allows the Roman Catholic Church to pursue its promotion of the gospel and to fulfill its Christian mission with perfect freedom, but also gives the Church a special role, which is to serve as a “critical conscience.” In other words, there may be instances—as has happened from time to time—for which the Church is called upon to address certain policies and issues that it sees as vitally important. Typically, these are ethical and moral concerns. In having the freedom to speak out, the Church’s voice can be heard within the civic sphere, without transgressing separation of church and state. In that respect, the Church exerts a moral influence, that may have some political effect. Or it may not. In any case, the Church contributes to the American experience by quickening the conscience of America’s political and civic leaders.

This brief comment on Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to the United States highlights, and reinforces, other statements from various Pontiffs in the Catholic Church, which are featured earlier in this chapter. Taken together, papal statements on America tend to emphasize the role of the United States doing its part to address issues of social justice on a world scale. Just as the Catholic Church, by definition, is “universal,” so also should be America’s outlook and outreach.

## Notes

1. John Paul II, "Meeting with the President of the United States of America, Mr. Ronald Reagan. Address of John Paul II." Vizcaya Museum, Miami. Thursday, September 10, 1987.
2. "Fissiparous [divisive, tending to split up] Protestantism" is an expression ascribed to Kenneth Scott Latourette.
3. William L. Portier, "Heartfelt Grief and Repentance in Imperial Times." *Love Alone Is Credible: Hans von Balthasar as Interpreter of the Catholic Tradition*. Volume 1. Ed. David L. Schindler (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 351–352.
4. *Ibid.*, 352.
5. Pope Leo XIII, "Concerning New Opinions, Virtue, Nature and Grace, with Regard to Americanism. *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae*." Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII promulgated on January 22, 1899.
6. Pope Benedict XVI, "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, 'Rotunda' Hall of the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center of Washington, D.C." Thursday, April 17, 2008.
7. Pope John Paul II, "Address of John Paul II to Hon. Richard B. Cheney, Vice President of the United States of America." Tuesday, January 27, 2004.
8. Pope John Paul II, "Welcome Address of His Holiness John Paul II." International Airport of Miami. Thursday, September 10, 1987."
9. John Paul II, "Meeting with the President of the United States of America, Mr. Ronald Reagan. Address of John Paul II." Vizcaya Museum, Miami. Thursday, September 10, 1987.
10. Mark S. Burrows, "The Catholic Revision of an American Myth: The Eschatology of Orestes Brownson as an Apology of American Catholicism." *Catholic Historical Review* 76 (1990): 18–43; Carl Krummel, "Catholicism, Americanism, Democracy, and Orestes Brownson." *American Quarterly* 6.1 (Spring 1954): 19–31.
11. Robert Herrera, "Orestes Brownson's Vision of America." *Modern Age* 43.2 (Spring 2001): 133–145 [133].
12. Robert A. Herrera, *Orestes Brownson: Sign of Contradiction* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), 74. Qtd. in Eric J. Scheske, "Orestes Brownson: His Life, His Catholicism." *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 7.2 (2004): 137–164 [150].
13. Orestes Brownson, "Mission of America." *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson*. Ed. Henry F. Brownson (Detroit: T. Nourse, 1884), vol. 11: 551–584 [567]. Qtd. in James Emmett Ryan, "Orestes Brownson in Young America: Popular Books and the Fate of Catholic Criticism." *American Literary History* 15.3 (2003): 443–470 [450].
14. See especially Patrick W. Carey, *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004); and idem, ed., *Orestes A. Brownson: Selected Writings. Sources of American Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991).
15. O. A. Brownson, LL.D., *The American Republic: Its Constitution, Tendencies, and Destiny* (New York: P. O'Shea, 1866).
16. *Ibid.*, "Chapter XV. Destiny—Political and Religious."



17. Ibid., "Chapter XI. The Constitution, Concluded."
18. Ibid., "Chapter XV. Destiny—Political and Religious."
19. Dennis Joseph Dease, *The Theological Influence of Orestes Brownson and Isaac Hecker on John Ireland's Americanist Ecclesiology* (Ph.D. dissertation: The Catholic University of America, 1978).
20. Translation: "Mayest thou [America] endure forever!" John Ireland, "The Church and Modern Society." In idem, *The Church and Modern Society: Lectures and Addresses* (New York: D. H. McBride, 1903), 27–65 [64–65]; Marvin O'Connell, *John Ireland and the American Catholic Church* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1988), 192–195; Neil T. Storch, "John Ireland's Americanism After 1899: The Argument from History." *Church History* 51.4 (1982): 434–444.
21. John Ireland, "The Church in America," *Lecture and Addresses*. Vol. II (St. Paul, MN: Pioneer Press, 1905), 240–241.
22. Pope Leo XIII, "Concerning New Opinions, Virtue, Nature and Grace, with Regard to Americanism. *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae*." Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII promulgated on January 22, 1899.
23. Qtd. in Monsignor John Tracy Ellis, ed., *Documents of American Catholic History* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing, 1956), 533.
24. See Gerald P. Fogarty, "The Vatican and the Americanist Crisis: Denis J. O'Connell, American Agent in Rome, 1885–1903." *Miscellanea Historiae Pontificiae*, 36 (Rome Universita` Gregoriana Editrice, 1974); and idem, "Americanism." *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*. Ed. Judith A. Dwyer (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 39–42.
25. John Paul II, "John Paul II on the American Experiment." *First Things* 82 (April 1998): 36–37.
26. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *A Moral Vision of America*. Ed. John P. Langan (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998).
27. John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005 [1960]).
28. See the "Foreword" by Walter J. Burghardt, S.J. (Georgetown University) to Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, vii–x [vii]. The author of the *Time* cover story on Father Murray was Protestant writer Douglas Auchincloss.
29. Peter Lawler, "Critical Introduction," in Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 2.
30. Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, xv.
31. Ibid., xv.
32. Joseph A. Varacalli, *Bright Promise, Failed Community: Catholics and the American Public Order* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000).
33. Ibid., 113.
34. Joseph A. Varacalli, "On Being Catholic American." *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (August–September 2004).
35. Pope Pius XII, "Wisdom—Not Weapons of War: A Program for Permanent Peace." *Collier's* (January 5, 1946): 9–11. See <http://www.unz.org/Public/Colliers-1946jan05>. (Accessed November 13, 2014.)
36. Ibid., 12.
37. Ibid., 13.
38. President Ronald Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation." (January 11, 1989.) See <http://reagan2020.us/speeches/Farewell.asp>. Video: <https://>

- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKVsq2daR8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKVsq2daR8). (Accessed November 22, 2014.)
39. D. Vincent Twomey, "Introduction" and "Chronology of the Life of Pope Benedict XVI," *Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches*. Ed. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), xiii–xxxiv and xxxv–xxxix.
  40. Pope Benedict XVI, "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI. "South Lawn of the White House, Washington, D.C. (April 16, 2008.) See [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080416\\_welcome-washington\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080416_welcome-washington_en.html). (Accessed November 30, 2014.)
  41. Pope Benedict XVI, "Apostolic Journey to the United States of America." (April 30, 2008.) See [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/audiences/2008/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20080430\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20080430_en.html). (Accessed November 30, 2014.)





Figure 6.1. Congregation Mickve Israel, Savannah, Georgia, was founded in 1733 by the third oldest Jewish community in America, and is the only neo-Gothic synagogue in America. In response to the Mickve Israel's letter of on May 6, 1789, President George Washington famously replied:

*May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivered the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors, planted them in a promised land, whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation, still continue to water them with the dews of heaven and make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.*

(Public domain. Photo by Richard Chambers, April 1, 2006. Black and white version of color original.)

## Chapter 6

# Jewish Myths and Visions of America

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*Behold America, the land of the future! . . . The land of promise for all persecuted!*

—Kaufmann Kohler (1911)<sup>1</sup>

*We thank Thee, O God, for having taught the founders of our Republic laws that safeguard the equal rights of all citizens and impose equal obligations upon all.*

—Mordecai Kaplan (1945)<sup>2</sup>

“**A**mericanism” simply refers to an ideology of America—its identity, mission, and destiny.

In the preceding chapter, Catholic visions of America—particularly those promoted by the so-called “Americanists” and, later, by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI—presupposed Protestant visions of America. To some degree, these eulogizing encomia of America were echoes of the Protestant master myth of America—yet Catholicized and deracialized. “Americanism” is also part of the common heritage of American Jews and served Jewish interests by serving American interests. Jewish Americanism was a “hyphen” that mediated between the extremes of ethnic ghettoism and total assimilation, thus allowing Jewish communities to have faith in America while “keeping the faith” as Jews.

Described as “a common feature in the history of all sectors in the American Jewish population,” Americanism has been “the sociocultural and political creed of several million Jews” and “should be reexamined as a Jewish form of self-defense and legitimation.”<sup>3</sup> Although noticeably ideological in form, Jewish visions of America are mythical in content, to the extent that these, in some ways, *reshape the Protestant myth of America by universalizing it*. By universalizing America’s identity, mission, and destiny, the interests of the American Jewish community, are, reflexively, benefited. In American

Judaism, therefore, one sees a transformative process at work. “As minority faiths strove to understand the meaning of America and their place in it,” writes James Moorhead, “minority faiths themselves played no small part in the weakening of white Protestant hegemony. Their creativity in adapting and reinterpreting the symbols of American destiny broadened the framework of discourse within which citizens explained national identity.”<sup>4</sup>

Jewish visions of America are directly linked to Jewish survival and identity. That is to say, the degree to which America takes on a religious significance is roughly coefficient with the extent to which America furthers Jewish interests. This is not a matter of expediency, but is directly connected with the future of Judaism in America itself. However, since America cannot, constitutionally speaking, directly advance Jewish interests by way of “state action,” those interests will be indirectly furthered so long as fundamental human and civic rights prevail and are held to be inviolable. What is good for all is certainly good for one. What promotes freedom of religion for all faiths, in general, redounds to the benefit of American Judaism in particular. What benefits all Americans will surely benefit American Jews.

Americanism is expressed in a wide array of ways. In “The New Covenant: The Jews and the Myth of America,” Sam B. Girgus asks whether a decidedly *religious* Jewish myth of America even exists.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, key prayers for America’s leaders and patriotic speeches by Jewish leaders will be cited, not as *definitive*, but as *representative* of Jewish visions of America. Even if there were definitive Jewish religious perspectives on America, they would be necessarily plural, since there is no chief rabbi in America, and no central Jewish authority. Consider the fact that American Jews now have an Orthodox Pentateuch, a Conservative Pentateuch, and a Reform Pentateuch. While the Hebrew text is the same, the translations are different, and so are the commentaries.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, while the historical context of American Jews is roughly the same, the interpretations of that experience are different. However, these interpretations do reflect certain patterns, a description of which may be helpful in presenting a coherent overview of Jewish visions of America.

This positive regard for America finds greater expression in Jewish civil religion than it does in the Jewish religion itself. What unifies the range of Jewish myths of America is the American experience itself. Despite backlashes of anti-Semitism, America has afforded immigrant Jews a land of refuge and of opportunity, as well as a place to maintain Jewish identity and continuity, even though assimilation (“Americanization”) has been seen as a real threat to the American Jewish communities. Reciprocally, American Jews have contributed enormously to American thought and culture.

Jewish uniqueness is largely an issue of cultural and religious survival:

“The key tenets of Jewish civil religion,” according to Jonathan Woocher, are “concern for Jewish survival, the belief in collective action on the behalf of both Jewish interests and Jewish values, a devotion to Israel as

a unique expression of Judaism's understanding of the meaning of and route toward redemption, and an acceptance of the community's right to make certain demands on us [as Americans]."<sup>7</sup>

In this sense, the preservation of uniqueness necessarily requires the presence of equality, with all of the safeguards it affords. A Jewish civil religion of America proceeds from American core values of equality. Here is where efforts were made by certain American Jewish leaders to integrate civil religion within the American Jewish communal experience.

## **Jewish Visions of America as a Mirror of Jewish Ideologies**

Jewish visions of America developed as a result of the Jewish experience in America. The first Jewish community in America was New Amsterdam—later known as New York, when, in 1664, the British took over the Dutch colonies and split the land into New York and New Jersey. These “Sephardic” Jews hailed from Spain and Portugal. Not long after, they were joined by “Ashkenazic” Jews from Germany and Europe. Here, the Jews enjoyed a newfound religious freedom, although not without suffering anti-Semitism, which was transplanted from the Old World into the New World. Notwithstanding, the 1776 Treaty of Breda gave full rights of trade, worship, and other rights to the settlers, including Jews. As popular support for the position that *freedom* of religion has been interpreted by Jewish Americans as *equality* of religion, Jonathan D. Sarna cites Article 11 of a 1797 treaty between the United States and the Bey and subjects of Tripoli, which states: “The government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.” Authored by American diplomat Joel Barlow in 1796, the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the United States and the Bey and subjects of Tripoli of Barbary was read aloud from the floor of the Senate, June 7, 1797, during the session of the Fifth Congress, where it was unanimously approved and later signed by President John Adams, who proclaimed it to the nation on June 10, 1797. Article 11 states, in full:

As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquillity, of Mussulmen; and, as the said states never entered into any war, or act of hostility against any Mahometan nation, it is declared by the parties, that no pretext arising from religious opinions, shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.<sup>8</sup>

This particular statement has often been cited by American Jewish leaders “to reassure the faithful that *no* religion obtains special treatment in

America.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, a natural affinity has developed between the right to be a Jew and civil rights for all peoples, giving rise to expressions of a Jewish civil religion of America. Trade-offs between *integration* and *identity*—that is, being accepted as Americans while maintaining their distinctive identity as Jews—are at the heart of Jewish perspectives on America. Since ethnic otherness has always stood in tension with American assimilation, a key to Jewish survival is to be forged—but *not melted*—in the “melting pot” of America. Before examining some of these prayers for the government, recited in American Jewish liturgies, it will be useful to establish a context for the Jewish myth of America as “The Promised Land,” followed by a brief overview of the Jewish myth of Columbus.

### The Jewish Myth of America as “The Promised Land”

For over 200 years, prominent Jewish leaders and writers have acclaimed America as the “Promised Land” or, alternatively, as the “Land of Promise.”<sup>10</sup> Several examples will serve to illustrate this ideological and social phenomenon. Elected to the South Carolina state legislature in 1810, Myer Moses II (1779–1833)—in a speech delivered in Charleston in 1806—exuberantly exclaimed: “The Almighty gave to the Jews what had long been promised them, namely a second Jerusalem! . . . I am so proud of being a sojourner in this promised land.”<sup>11</sup> In December 1898, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations adopted a resolution that proclaimed: “America is our Zion. Here in the home of religious liberty, we have aided in founding of this new Zion, the fruition of the beginning laid in the old.”<sup>12</sup> And in 1987, Jewish historian and Conservative Rabbi Jacob Neusner was quite explicit in affirming that America is indeed the Promised Land for Jews:

It is time to say that America is a better place to be a Jew than Jerusalem. If ever there was a Promised Land, we Jewish Americans are living in it. Here Jews have flourished, not alone in politics and the economy, but in matters of art, culture and learning. Jews feel safe and secure here in ways that they do not and cannot in the State of Israel.<sup>13</sup>

Traditionally, exile and return is a powerful organizing principle of Jewish history. It has served as a hermeneutical prism of the American Jewish experience as well. Indeed, Jewish visions of America have arisen out of the American Jewish experience in a reciprocal interplay of Jewish and American identities, shaped also by the motif of “Holocaust and Redemption,” which, according to Jacob Neusner, still operates as “*the generative myth by which the generality of Jewish Americans make sense of themselves and decide what to do with that part of themselves set aside for ‘being Jewish’.*”<sup>14</sup>

Certainly the most poignant and tragic moment of the 2,000-year Exile was the Holocaust. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the subsequent return



of Jews to their ancestral homeland of Israel (i.e., the *Kibbutz Galuyot*, the “ingathering of the exiles”) and the formation of the state of Israel in 1948 is part of the “Redemption” of Jews. Thus it comes as no surprise that the Holocaust and the State of Israel are dominant themes that defined American Jewish identity in the latter half of the twentieth century, although less so in the twenty-first century. Within the American experience itself, Jonathan D. Sarna sees a pattern of *exile* and *return* to Judaism—in which American Judaism *waxes* and *wanes*—with perpetual tension between these polarities.<sup>15</sup>

Jewish Americans are understandably concerned more about the biblical Promised Land—Israel—than about America, which, prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, offered its own promise as a virtual and, perhaps, surrogate “Promised Land.” Different from American Protestants—who looked to America as God’s New Israel—the ancestral Jewish homeland and the modern state of Israel remain a powerful orientation for nearly all Jews. Jewish Americans have a *home* in America and a *homeland* in Israel. While America is still home to the world’s largest Jewish community, the Jewish homeland of Israel—not America—is the *axis mundis* of the Jewish world.

As Israel’s most powerful ally, America has played a key role in strategically protecting the biblical Promised Land. It would seem that such a role, in the eyes of Jewish Americans at least, would have invested America with some kind of transcendent purpose, since America has providentially safeguarded the Holy Land. Ironically, while one might expect that this singular fact should have taken on some *religious* significance, one is hard-pressed to find a definitive “theology of America” within an American Jewish framework itself. Instead, Jewish visions of “America” are articulated in a number of less-pronounced ways.

There is no question that Jewish patriotism for America is healthy and vibrant, in a secular sense. But does America have any *religious* significance for Jewish Americans? Is America exceptional, in any way, just as the Jews themselves are regarded as exceptional, as a “chosen people”? Are Jewish Americans a “chosen people” within a “chosen” nation? There is American exceptionalism and then there is Jewish exceptionalism. The two are obviously not the same. From Jewish perspectives, American exceptionalism is coefficient with America’s ability to preserve and promote Jewish exceptionalism. And so it is that Jewish Americans have been described as “A Unique People in an Exceptional Country.”<sup>16</sup>

In thinking about the religious significance that America may hold for Jewish Americans, one must keep in mind that American Judaism is composed of multi-synagogue communities that primarily include Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist groups, not to mention religiously unaffiliated and “other” Jews, reflecting a *de facto* religious pluralism within American Judaism. Since there are four normative branches of Judaism in the United States today—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Judaism—Jewish Americanism has been variously

expressed, and not without controversy. One aspect of this is the Jewish myth of Columbus, in which it is said that Jews accompanied Christopher Columbus in his discovery of America.

### **The Jewish “Myth of Columbus”**

In 1492, when Christopher Columbus discovered America, Jews were expelled from Spain. Notwithstanding, when Columbus sailed from Old World Spain to the New World, Luis de Torres, a Jewish interpreter, accompanied him. Thus, Jews can claim to have played a role in America from the very moment America was discovered. The Jewish experience in America, therefore, reaches as far back as the discovery of America itself. Imagine if Christopher Columbus himself was a Jew. If so, then Jewish Americans could rightly claim that they are as authentically “American” as any other American, since the discoverer of America was himself a Jew. It is for this reason that the figure of Columbus has taken on mythic proportions in American Judaism, albeit in a secular rather than a religious sense.

The Jewish myth of Columbus was developed as part of an overarching survival strategy and as a means of gaining American respect. The popular Jewish myth that Columbus himself was crypto-Jew served as a bulwark against rising nativism in America.<sup>17</sup> “Other ethnic groups in America claimed founder status based on their putative roles as discoverers of the new world,” observes Jonathan D. Sarna. “Jews, I believe, are the only group which has claimed status based on ties to the Indians, the Puritans, and Columbus, as well.”<sup>18</sup> By associating themselves with the founding myths of America, Jewish Americans could prove that they, like the Indians, were original Americans and played a role in America’s origins.

### **Jewish Prayers for America: Communal Visions of America**

Historically, nearly all Jewish prayer books in America have included a prayer for the welfare of the government. This is part of a long-standing Jewish practice around the world, as Gordon M. Freeman explains: “In fact, a prayer for the government is a feature of every type of prayer book of every land of the Jewish diaspora irrespective of the specific religious movement of the community.”<sup>19</sup> This is an ancient Jewish obligation and a venerable tradition that has carried over to the Jewish experience in America. In the rabbinic commentary, *Pirke Avot*, Jews are enjoined to “Pray for the welfare of the government, because were it not for the fear it inspires, every man would swallow his neighbor alive” (3:2). Jews have maintained this time-honored practice from the time of the Second Temple. Alexander the Great, it is said, claimed that the priests in the temple prayed for his well-being.

While prayer does not have scriptural status, it is a conduit of religious ideology. Since there is no Jewish scripture regarding America, one therefore looks to Jewish prayer books for some communal Jewish perspectives on America. Prayer books, after all, are not simply liturgy. They are communal performances of doctrine in a spirit of devotion. “Second only to the Torah, the *siddur* (prayer book),” states one Reform rabbi, “expresses the ideology of our people.”<sup>20</sup> As a congregation prays, so it believes.

As ideology evolves, so do prayer books. As such, they are documents of the history of ideas within religious contexts. Liturgical texts, as Jonathan D. Sarna demonstrates, offer a window into history: “Prayer, while unquestionably a part of the American experience, is not a phenomenon that most American historians study. Yet, liturgical texts—as well as other aspects of prayer—may be subjected to historical analysis.”<sup>21</sup>

While there is no communally held doctrine of America among Jews in the United States today, Jews have ritually included prayers for the U.S. government in various prayer books. In other words, American Judaism has what might be called a “liturgy of America,” although this aspect of Jewish worship is admittedly minor. A study of these prayers, therefore, will reveal some ways in which Jews incorporate the secular into the sacred, partly through a process of *sacralizing the secular*. American Jewish prayer books are a testament to the Americanization of Judaism.

## Orthodox Judaism’s Traditional Prayer for the Government

What may be the first Jewish prayer for the U.S. government is a handwritten manuscript dated 1784, although neither would the U.S. Constitution be ratified nor George Washington be elected as the nation’s first president until 1789. This prayer, preserved in the Jacques Judah Lyons Collection of the American Jewish Historical Society, is a prayer of thanksgiving for the successful conclusion of the American War for Independence. The prayer itself is attributed to Hendla Jochanan van Oettingen, a *hazzan* (reader) of New York’s Congregation *Shearith Israel*, the country’s first Jewish congregation. The prayer mentions the names of both General George Washington, commander in chief of the American Army, and Governor George Clinton, chief magistrate of New York. The prayer reads, in part:

Mayest Thou grant intelligence, wisdom and knowledge to our lords, the rulers of these thirteen states. . . . As Thou has granted to these thirteen states of America everlasting freedom, so mayest Thou bring us forth once again from bondage into freedom.<sup>22</sup>

In 1826, however, the version of *Hanoten Teshua* published in New York blesses the president and the vice president, the Senate, the House of

Representatives, the governor, the lieutenant governor, and the magistrates of New York City.<sup>23</sup>

The most explicitly nationalist of these Orthodox prayers for the American government is one that was rediscovered by Jonathan D. Sarna. The prayer, *Ribbon Kol Ha-olamim*, rendered into English, reads, in part:

Master of the Universe, Lord of all Works, Who extends peace like a river, and the glory of nations like a rapid stream. Look down from Your holy dwelling and bless this land, the United States of America, whereon we dwell. Let not violence be heard in their land, wasting and destruction within their boundaries, but You shall call its walls "Salvation" and its gates "Praise." . . .

Pour down the bounty of Your goodness upon the President, and the Vice President of the United States. Let their prosperity be like a river, their righteousness like the waves of the sea. In their days may kindness and truth meet each other, righteousness and peace kiss. Great shall be their honor; through Your help and in Your strength they will greatly exult. Amen. . . .

Ordain Your blessings also upon the Governor and the lieutenant Governor of the state and the Mayor and the Common Council of this City. Teach them the good way wherein they should walk so as to judge the entire people rightly, the entire nation justly, and all will see it and delight themselves from the abundance of peace. Send Your salvation also to the City of New York and all its inhabitants. Spread over them the canopy of Your Peace and remove from them every ailment and mishap. . . .<sup>24</sup>

Sarna, who ascribes the authorship of this unique prayer to Rabbi Max Lilienthal (1814?–1882),<sup>25</sup> observes that particular prayer "did much to signify to them that America was different—if not actually Zion then the closest thing to it."<sup>26</sup> This prayer is no longer in use. One reason is that this was a purely local innovation. It was atypical of Orthodox Judaism generally.

Of the four forms of contemporary American Judaism, Orthodox liturgy is the least amenable to change, as Ruth Langer notes:

The contemporary Orthodox world defines itself by adherence to traditional *halakhah*, including the received liturgical text, and by varying degrees of opposition to the outside world. Therefore, its core Hebrew and Aramaic prayer texts are nonnegotiable. At the most liberal end of the spectrum, modern Orthodoxy seeks cultural accommodation within the bounds of *halakhah*, which still creates a community that sees itself as religiously rigorously separate. Accommodation to modernity occurs in the esthetic presentation of the liturgy, in the printed translations or commentaries, and sometimes in the choices of *piyyutim* or other non-halakhic elements of the service.<sup>27</sup>

By way of a very brief introduction, Orthodox Judaism accepts, without reservation, the doctrine: “The Torah is from Heaven.”<sup>28</sup> Orthodox Jews thus see themselves as “Torah-true.” They manifest complete loyalty to the Jewish past. Basically, Orthodoxy represents faithfulness to the practices of Judaism as enshrined in the *Halakhah* in its traditional formulation. That is, an Orthodox Jew is one who obeys the rules promulgated in the standard Code of Jewish law, the *Shulhan Arukh*. Orthodox Judaism rejects the notion advocated by Reform Judaism that, in the light of modernity, Judaism needs to be “reformed.” This “old-time religion” is good enough for Orthodox Jews.<sup>29</sup> There are, however, a range of Orthodox worldviews, from the ultra-Orthodox to neo-Orthodoxy.<sup>30</sup> Notwithstanding, Orthodox Jews are unified in rightly claiming that theirs is the Judaism of tradition as practiced in the premodern era.<sup>31</sup> In contrast to Reform Judaism, which sought to place ethical monotheism at the center of Jewish life, Orthodox Judaism placed the Torah at the center of Jewish life.

Common to Orthodox Judaism and Reform Judaism, however, is the fact that both integrated prayer in support of the government in their respective liturgies. The traditional Orthodox Jewish prayer for the government is known as the *Hanoten Teshu’ah*. From its origins in the fifteenth century, the *Hanoten Teshu’ah* became the most popular prayer for the government until the twentieth century. An Americanized version of this Orthodox prayer reads as follows:

#### PRAYER FOR THE GOVERNMENT

##### Hanoten Teshu’ah

*The reader takes the Torah and recites:*

He who granted victory to kings and dominion to princes, his kingdom is a kingdom of all ages; he who delivered his servant David from the evil sword, he who opened a road through the sea, a path amid the mighty waters—may he bless and protect, help and exalt:

#### THE PRESIDENT AND THE VICE PRESIDENT AND ALL THE OFFICERS OF THIS COUNTRY.

May the supreme King of kings, in his mercy, sustain them and deliver them from all distress and misfortune. May the supreme King of kings, in his mercy, inspire them and all their counselors and aides to deal kindly with us and with all Israel. In their days and in our days Judah shall be saved, Israel shall dwell in security, and a redeemer shall come to Zion. May this be the will of God; and let us say, Amen.<sup>32</sup>

There is nothing remarkably “American” about this prayer, except for its recognition of the fact that the leaders of the American government are the U.S. president and vice president. Although assumed, the United States is not named. In his 2006 paper, “Who is an American Jew?,” Michael Walzer,

of The Institute for Advanced Study's School of Social Science, Princeton University, comments on this prayer in the American context:

This is an extraordinary prayer for citizens to recite, given that the president and vice president must come to them and ask for their votes. In fact, the prayer isn't written in the common language of democratic citizenship, but in a much older language. It reflects an exilic sense of marginality and danger. For centuries, we were radically dependent on the kindness of kings, but our relation to presidents is, or ought to be, different. Perhaps the subtext of the orthodox prayer is skepticism about that difference. The people who recite it, assuming that they mean what they say, are still living in the imaginative space of exile, where "all the world is against us." They are in fact citizens of the United States but in their own minds, they are something else.<sup>33</sup>

During the Vietnam years, "chauvinistic prayers from an earlier era rang hollow."<sup>34</sup> From then until now, the traditional Jewish practice of praying for the welfare of the government—a tradition with a rich and venerable history going back to the medieval period—has experienced widespread decline. It was during the post-Vietnam era when traditional prayers for America largely fell silent, with the result that this practice has largely disappeared, as Sarna observes: "Impressionistic evidence suggests that even where prayer books did include a regular prayer for the government, congregations recited it less frequently."<sup>35</sup> A prime example of this trend is that a popular Orthodox *siddur*, known as *The Complete Art Scroll Siddur* (1984), includes no prayer for the government at all, with only a footnote that perfunctorily explains that "in many congregations, a prayer for the welfare of the State is recited."<sup>36</sup> Ironically, this would appear to be a break from the Orthodox tradition of offering prayers for the government, throughout the Diaspora.

## Conservative Judaism's Vision of America

Conservative Judaism occupies the middle ground between Orthodoxy and Reform. With its center in the United States, Conservative Judaism is the largest of the four movements in America. Jewish Theological Seminary in New York (with branches in Los Angeles and Jerusalem) is the primary institution for the training of Conservative Rabbis, who are organized as the Rabbinical Assembly of Conservative Rabbis. Zachariah Frankel and Solomon Schechter are the two key thinkers of Conservative Judaism.<sup>37</sup> While Schechter was Conservative Judaism's most illustrious personality, the leading ideologist of Conservative Judaism in the Schechter era was Israel Friedlaender. In 1907, Friedlaender presented his vision of America within the broader context of Zionism: "The only place where such a Judaism has a chance of realization is America."<sup>38</sup>

Conservative Jews have a new prayer book (*siddur*), the *Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals*, edited by Rabbi Lawrence Cahan. The previous *siddur*, also titled *Sim Shalom*, was edited by Rabbi Jules Harlow, but contains services for weekdays, along with Sabbath and festivals. The prior *Sim Shalom* was first published in 1985. The first Conservative *siddur* appeared in 1927. That *siddur* introduced a “Prayer for Our Country,” which was considered an innovation. Of all Jewish prayers for the American government, the most perdurable is “A Prayer for Our Country,” composed by the great rabbinic scholar, Louis Ginzberg (1873–1953). As Rabbi David Golinkin states: “In 1927, when the Conservative movement published its first prayer book for festivals, Professor Louis Ginzberg composed the prayer for the government. This version is no longer based on *Hanoten Tes-hua* which was intended for a monarchy. It is a brand new prayer expressly written for a democracy.”<sup>39</sup>

First published both in Hebrew and in English translation in the *Festival Prayer Book* of the Conservative movement (1927), this prayer was subsequently reprinted in standard Conservative Jewish prayer books and in older Reconstructionist prayer books as well.<sup>40</sup> All major Conservative prayer books contain this prayer, which is essentially the same text in Hebrew, but with varying English paraphrases.<sup>41</sup> The so-called “Silverman Siddur” (with black bindings), was edited by Rabbi Morris Silverman and first published in 1946. Silverman intended the “Prayer for Our Country” as a replacement for the ancient prayer for the government. The “Silverman Siddur” was standard in the Conservative movement for nearly 40 years, and is still in use at some synagogues today. In 1962, Rabbi Silverman composed “A Prayer for Our Country,” published in the *High Holiday Prayer Book*. This prayer reads, in part:

#### A PRAYER FOR OUR COUNTRY

May all the peoples that make up this great Commonwealth consecrate their efforts, under Thy guidance, to the cause of liberty, equality, and justice. May we remain united in purpose, respecting each other’s rights and striving together with resolute hearts and willing hands for the welfare of all the inhabitants of our land.<sup>42</sup>

The *Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals* is only for Sabbath and festivals, with no liturgy for weekday services. However, the new *Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals* continues the regular use of Louis Ginzberg’s prayer for America:

#### A PRAYER FOR OUR COUNTRY

Our God and God of our ancestors: We ask Your blessings for our country—for its government, for its leaders and advisors, and for all who exercise just and rightful authority. Teach them insights from Your Torah, that they may administer all affairs of state fairly, that peace and security, happiness and prosperity, justice and freedom may forever abide in our midst.

Creator of all flesh, bless all the inhabitants of our country with Your spirit. May citizens of all races and creeds forge a common bond in true harmony, to banish hatred and bigotry, and to safeguard the ideals and free institutions that are the pride and glory of our country.

May this land, under your providence, be an influence for good throughout the world, uniting all people in peace and freedom—helping them to fulfill the vision of your prophet: “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they experience war any more” (Isaiah 2:4). And let us say: Amen.<sup>43</sup>

As explained by Ruth Langer, “our country” in American Reform liturgies through the mid-twentieth century always referred to the United States.<sup>44</sup> In Sarna’s translation, the prayer reads, in part: “May citizens of all races and creeds forge a common bond in true harmony to banish all hatred and bigotry.” The universalism of this prayer is also evident in this passage: “Plant among the peoples of different nationalities and faiths who dwell here, love and brotherhood, peace and friendship.”<sup>45</sup> Ginzberg’s vision of America—liturgically shared by Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaism—represents what Sarna terms a “universalistic peroration.”<sup>46</sup> It is a prayer that transcends sectarian boundaries and creedal differences.

## Reform Judaism’s Vision of America

In 1830, the Reformed Society of Israelites in Charleston, South Carolina, published an English prayer book that contained a “Prayer for the Government in English,” to be recited during “The Service on Sabbath Morning.” This prayer follows immediately after the “Reading of the Sanctification of the Sabbath and the Sh’ma in English by the Minister With Responses by the Congregation.”<sup>47</sup> This “Prayer for the Government in English”—composed by David N. Carvalho—is described by Jonathan D. Sarna as follows:

Written entirely in English, the new prayer had none of the regal language of its traditional counterpart. Rather than “exalting” the President and other federal and state officials, for example, it simply asked God to “bless,” “preserve,” and (a reflection of their highest ideal) “enlighten” them. Then, in an expression of patriotic piety not previously encountered in an American Jewish prayer book, it thanked God for having “numbered us with the inhabitants of this thy much favoured land . . . where the noble and virtuous mind is the only crown of distinction, and equality of rights the only fountain of power,” for having removed from the republic “the intolerance of bigotry,” and for freeing its people “from the yoke of political and religious bondage.” Finally, it sought divine blessings upon



“the people of these United States,” called for charity, friendship and unity among them, and prayed that “the lights of science and civilization . . . defend them on every side from the subtle hypocrite and open adversary.” The hope for Jewish redemption that closed the traditional prayer for the government went unmentioned.<sup>48</sup>

For Reform Jews, America is the “Land of Promise”—just as Israel is the “Promised Land.”<sup>49</sup> After Reform spread from Germany to America, Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900) became the redoubtable architect of Reform Judaism in the United States. In 1875, the Hebrew Union College was established, by Wise, in Cincinnati for the training of Reform Rabbis.<sup>50</sup>

How does Reform Judaism define itself? It does so by periodically *redefining* itself. On four occasions throughout its American history, the Reform rabbinate has adopted principles formulated in statements that have guided the thought and practice of the Reform movement. In 1885, fifteen rabbis promulgated the *Pittsburgh Platform*, a set of principles that piloted Reform Judaism for the next 50 years. In 1937, a revised set of principles—the *Columbus Platform*—was adopted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis. In 1976, a third set of rabbinic guidelines, the *Centenary Perspective*, was proclaimed on the occasion of the centenary of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion. Then, in the 1999 Pittsburgh Convention, the Central Conference of American Rabbis adopted “A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism.” Thus, the 1999 *Pittsburgh Platform* represents quite an evolution of Reform doctrine beyond the original 1885 *Pittsburgh Platform*. So, on the one hand, Reform Jews are part and parcel of the people of Israel: “We are Israel, a people aspiring to holiness, singled out through our ancient covenant and our unique history among the nations to be witnesses to God’s presence.” On the other hand, Reform Jews in America are part and parcel of the people of America: “We embrace religious and cultural pluralism as an expression of the vitality of Jewish communal life in Israel and the Diaspora.”<sup>51</sup> America is obviously part of that Diaspora. Therefore, Reform Jews—as with Jewish Americans generally—may be regarded as a *dual-authority polity*. As one might expect, the corresponding ideology would have both Jewish and American interests at heart.

In the Reform view, Judaism is a universal religion, a “light unto the nations.” Reform sees itself as part of the “Jewish mission” to mankind.<sup>52</sup> For Reform Jews, as previously stated, America is the “Land of Promise”—just as Israel is the “Promised Land.” Perhaps this was little more than an ideology for Jewish survival in America.<sup>53</sup> Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise believed Judaism first had to be modernized, democratized, and Americanized before it could be universalized as a religion that would enlighten the world. America would play a pivotal role in the destiny of Judaism. In 1869, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise proclaimed:

History is Providence realized. . . . The destiny which a nation realizes in the designs of Providence, is its place in history. . . . The people of the United States, on accepting this Constitution, had formally and solemnly chosen its destiny, to be now and forever the palladium of liberty and its divinely appointed banner-bearer, for the progress and redemption of mankind. . . . Freedom to all nations; freedom to every man, this is our country's place in history; liberty in the name of my God and my country.<sup>54</sup>

Reform Judaism has used a succession of three major prayer books: (1) *The Union Prayer Book* (1894); (2) *Gates of Prayer* (1975);<sup>55</sup> and (3) the *Mishkan T'filah* ("Tabernacle of Prayer" or "Sanctuary of Prayer") (2007). Reform Judaism's first official prayer book, *The Union Prayer Book for Jewish Worship, Seder Tifilos Yisroel*, was first published in 1894. The predecessor of the *Union Prayer Book* was *Minhag America* (1857), edited by Isaac Mayer Wise. Curiously, *Minhag America*—an ambitious, yet unsuccessful attempt to unify American Judaism around a common liturgy—did not contain a prayer for the welfare of the government.<sup>56</sup> Nor was the *Union Prayer Book* modeled on *Minhag America*, but rather on Dr. David Einhorn's radical *Olat Tamid* prayer book, a reworked liturgy in German with Hebrew selections reading from left to right, for Sunday morning services.<sup>57</sup> The *Union Prayer Book* features the following prayer for America:

#### FOR OUR PEOPLE AND OUR NATION

Bless, O God, this congregation, those who lead and serve it, those who contribute to its strength. Bless all who enter this House, that the worship offered within its walls may be worthy of Your greatness and Your love, and that all who seek Your presence here may find it. For the joy of community, the gift of diversity, and the vision of harmony, we offer our grateful thanks.

Bless our land and all its inhabitants. Prosper us in all our undertakings. Be with those whom we have chosen to lead us, that they may strive to establish justice and opportunity for all, and labor to bring peace to the family of nations.

Bless the household of Israel wherever they dwell. Be with us here, where we worship You in freedom. And may those who live under oppressive rule find release and liberty speedily, in our own day.

May Your favor rest upon Israel, her land, her people. Protect her against hatred and war. Grant that the promise of her beginning may ripen into fulfillment, bringing comfort to those who seek refuge, light to those who dwell in darkness, new hope to all humanity. And let us say: Amen.

The successor to the *Union Prayer Book* was the *Gates of Prayer*—a liturgy said to be a "unique blending of Jewish tradition and the American spirit." Notwithstanding the merits of this prayer for America in the *Union Prayer*

*Book*, Sarna observes that the replacement prayer was perfunctory in comparison, comprising just four lines:

The new Reform Jewish prayer book, *Gates of Prayer* (1975), for example, abandoned the fervent supplication that was for so long a staple of Reform Jewish worship, replacing it with an occasional prayer, divorced from the regular liturgy, that covered the nation, its inhabitants, and its leaders in four short lines.<sup>58</sup>

In 1994, the Reform movement introduced its gender-inclusive liturgy, *Gates of Prayer for Shabbat and Weekdays: A Gender Sensitive Prayer Book*. Under *Gates of Prayer*, plain text is what the rabbi or leader reads; text in italics is what the congregation reads. The *Gates of Prayer* was phased out in 2007, as was the four-line prayer for America. *The Mishkan T'filah—A Reform Siddur* (“Tabernacle of Prayer” or “Sanctuary of Prayer”) is the new Reform siddur. It has no italics, and thus does not differentiate rabbi from congregant as to what is recited. The current Reform prayer for America is as follows:

FOR OUR COUNTRY

THUS SAYS ADONAI, This is what I desire:

To unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of lawlessness;

To let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke.

Share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home.

When you see the naked, give clothing, and do not ignore your own kin.

If you banish the yoke from your midst, the menacing hand, the evil speech;

If you offer compassion to the hungry and satisfy the famished creature—

Then your light shall shine in darkness. [Isaiah 58:6–7, 9–10]

O GUARDIAN of life and liberty,

may our nation always merit Your protection.

Teach us to give thanks for what we have by sharing it with those who are in need.

Keep our eyes open to the wonders of creation, and alert to the care of the earth.

May we never be lazy in the work of peace;

and honor those who have died in defense of our ideals.

Grant our leaders wisdom and forbearance.

May they govern with justice and compassion.

Help us all to appreciate one another,

And to respect the many ways that we serve You.

May our homes be safe from affliction and strife,  
 and may our country be sound in body and spirit.  
 Amen<sup>59</sup>

This Reform prayer for America may be regarded as a meditation on Isaiah 58:6–7, 9–10. Here, the social ethic that Isaiah enjoins on the individual is generalized to the leaders of America. If guided by the principles of Isaiah, then America will “govern with justice and compassion” as a reflex of “wisdom and forbearance.” While peace remains the overarching ideal, there appears to be a doctrine of just war “in defense of our ideals.” Rather than idealizing America’s world role in the community of nations, there seems to be a greater emphasis on “protection” and “defense.” Might the emphasis of this prayer be a response, in part, to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001? What is clear and manifest is that this Reform prayer for America is infused with prophetic ideals.

In light of this decline in Reform liturgical support for America, one wonders if this kind of claim can withstand scrutiny: “Certainly no movement,” one historian observes, “exceeded Reform in alluding to America’s chosenness.”<sup>60</sup> Historically, Reconstructionist Judaism is certainly a close rival.

## Reconstructionist Judaism’s Vision of America

Briefly, Reconstructionism is an American movement with branches abroad. Reconstructionism views Judaism as a “civilization”—replete with its own religion, culture, music, literature, art, mores, and folkways. Founded by Mordecai Menaheim Kaplan (1881–1983), Reconstructionists seek to revitalize Judaism in the modern world.<sup>61</sup> Reconstructionism, having developed as a fourth Jewish movement in the United States, has established its own seminary, the Rabbinical College in Wyncote, Pennsylvania, founded in 1957. While a small number of Reconstructionist synagogues have also been established, Reconstructionist Rabbis serve in Reform and Conservative congregations as well.<sup>62</sup> Liturgical creativity has been a hallmark of Reconstructionism.<sup>63</sup>

Mordecai M. Kaplan founded Reconstructionism in an effort to bridge the divisions of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism.<sup>64</sup> In this, he did not succeed. However, he established, for his followers at least, democracy as a religious value. Kaplan has come to be valued more highly now as compared to then: “Mordecai M. Kaplan is rightly acclaimed as the greatest Jewish thinker to have emerged from the American Jewish context.”<sup>65</sup> Born in Lithuania in 1881, arriving in the United States at the age of nine, in 1934, Mordecai M. Kaplan published his magnum opus and what would certainly be his most enduring work: *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*.<sup>66</sup>

The title of this masterwork could be transposed to reflect a sub-thesis: *America as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Life*. While the transformation of this title is the present writer's, it does reflect some recent scholarship on Kaplan: "Scholars and Jewish thinkers alike have much to learn from Kaplan's efforts to save Judaism by reconstructing the common understanding of American civilization."<sup>67</sup> For this analysis, the following statement by Kaplan shows that, ideally, Judaism would exercise a beneficial influence on America by transforming America's democratic nationalism into a civilizational nationalism—one that adumbrates the civic virtues of democracy, while allowing for the reciprocal influence of religious values:

America is destined to depart from the strict logic of democratic nationalism and to achieve a new cultural constellation in which historical civilizations, or churches, may be permitted to conserve the finest products of their experience and contribute them to the sum total of American culture and civilization.<sup>68</sup>

Jewish Americans, in Kaplan's view, have a mission to widen America's profession and practice of democracy:

Kaplan clung tenaciously to an unwavering belief in the promise of America. Steadfast faith in the ideal of American democracy served as a cornerstone of his program for the Jewish future, the American future, and the relationship between the two. He repeatedly stressed that the fate of Jews was "bound up with that of genuine democracy." But the notion that Jewish survival rested on the security provided by American democracy represents only one (perhaps the most obvious) element of Kaplan's philosophy. Kaplan also posited a specific mission for Jews in America. In one of the many sentences that he tended to italicize in order to signal their importance to the reader, he insisted that, "By staking our fortune upon the ultimate establishment of true democracy, we are contributing to that consummation." Democracy, as the foundation of American civil religion, had for Kaplan a spiritual component, capable of providing "a source of inner peace" for all Americans; moreover, he claimed that Jews had a particular role in bringing American democracy to its fullest expression.<sup>69</sup>

Noam Pianko argues that Kaplan's use of the term "civilization" plays two disparate functions in Kaplan's thought. His original purpose was to equate Judaism with the highest values of America, regarded as one of the world's premier "civilizations." Later, "Kaplan appropriated the term civilization in order to present Jewish nationalism as an important corrective to totalizing claims of American nationalism prevalent in the years leading up to the publication of his magnum opus"<sup>70</sup> in 1934.

Kaplan later translated this ideology into liturgy, both for Americans in general and for Jewish Americans in particular. In 1951, Mordecai Kaplan and two other editors edited a now-forgotten anthology, *The Faith of America: Readings, Songs and Prayers for the Celebration of American Holidays*.<sup>71</sup> *The Faith of America* was composed as a liturgy for American civic celebrations, as Kaplan himself writes: “This book is designed to foster faith in American democracy through the observance of our national holidays. Each holiday becomes not only a day for recreation but a means for deepening our democratic faith.”<sup>72</sup> Kaplan goes on to explain how the lofty principles of Judaism should exert an edifying influence to elevate to America’s civil religion:

An illustration of the way those principles should be incorporated in American institutional life is afforded by *The Faith of America*. That book contains programs for the religious observance of American holidays. . . . Given the wish to survive as a segment of the Jewish people, that wish is bound to seek an outlet in some effort that would give to our persistence as Jews not merely the significance of inertia but rather the lift that comes from being dedicated to a high purpose. That high purpose should be to contribute to the spiritual life of America the kind of civic religion that will place America in the spiritual forefront of the world, as she is now in the political and economic.<sup>73</sup>

While the anthology itself failed to attract a following in the wider American society, six years earlier, Rabbi Kaplan’s civic commemorations had already entered the Reconstructionist *Sabbath Prayer Book*, published in 1945. The *Sabbath Prayer Book* incensed the American Orthodox rabbis. The last section of this prayer book is dedicated to American civic festivals, reflecting “Kaplan’s desire to have Jews internalize civic commitment and to lend that commitment a religious dimension.”<sup>74</sup> Historian Beth Wenger cites a few examples from the *Sabbath Prayer Book*:

Kaplan hoped that including patriotic sentiments in prayer would encourage Jews to internalize devotion to American ideals as a religious obligation. The prayer books of other Jewish movements contained various readings about America, including the American anthem and a prayer for the government, but Kaplan’s innovation was to create organized services for national holidays. On Independence Day, worshippers actually rose to recite in unison two paragraphs from the Declaration of Independence, beginning with, “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” Nowhere is the essence of Kaplan’s ideology more apparent than in a lengthy reading for Thanksgiving Day that celebrates “God’s Goodness” in four parts, beginning with “The Testament on Nature,” then moving to “The Testament of Man,” then to “The Testament of Israel” (here, the people Israel), and

finally concluding with “The Testament of America.” In a clearly formulated teleology, Kaplan takes God’s plan from nature, to human beings, to the Jewish people, to the United States of America.<sup>75</sup>

A quick glance at the “Table of Contents” of the *Sabbath Prayer Book: With A Supplement Containing Prayers, Readings and Hymns and With A New Translation*<sup>76</sup> reveals that “God’s Goodness—the Testament of America” appears on pages 559–560, which reads as follows:

God’s Goodness—the Testament of America

Thy goodness is revealed in the *Testament of America*. Into this land there have assembled the outcast and the weary of the older nations of the world. Here they dreamed a new dream of a nation founded on the truth, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among those rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

And because Thou hast been with us and Thy goodness has kept us strong, the freedom which they won is still ours. May we ever be worthy of our American heritage; may we ever treasure our liberties, not for ourselves alone but for all our fellowmen; and may our country become a guiding light to all mankind.

In the words of Abraham Lincoln:

*“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in. To do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations. Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? Is there any better or equal hope in the world?”*<sup>77</sup>

*“In founding the United States, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. It is for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us. We here highly resolve that the dead shall not have died in vain.”*<sup>78</sup>

*“That this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.”*<sup>79</sup>

*Reader and Congregation*

For all these, O Lord Our God, we thank Thee: for Thy goodness as maintained in Nature, in the human spirit, in Israel’s Torah, and in America’s promise. Embolden our hearts so that, surmounting discouragement and despair, we may learn to see clearly Thy bounties, and seeing them, make them manifest to all the world. Amen.

One remarkable feature of this liturgy is how “Israel’s Torah” and “America’s promise” are mentioned together, side-by-side. God’s “goodness” is manifested in four ways: in Nature, the human spirit, the Torah, and in “America’s promise” itself, which is not defined. From the context, it appears that America’s world role is envisioned if, by the words “promise,” the idea of America’s potential to serve as an instrument in making God’s goodness “manifest to all the world” is a valid reading.

“America the Beautiful” is printed on page 561 of the *Sabbath Prayer Book*. Moreover, on Brotherhood Sabbath (celebrated on the Sabbath between Washington’s and Lincoln’s birthdays), the following prayer is to be recited: “We thank Thee, O God, for having taught the founders of our Republic laws that safeguard the equal rights of all citizens and impose equal obligations upon all.”<sup>80</sup> This prayer, in effect, sacralizes American governance as divinely sanctioned. Kaplan had included the *American Declaration of Independence* as a supplementary prayer book reading. Four years earlier, Kaplan, in *The New Haggadah*—co-edited with Ira Eisenstein and Eugene Kohn—included a reference to the “sacred rights” of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>81</sup> Eric Caplan provides an even fuller description:

Kaplan included services for all major American civic holidays in the supplement, a clear outgrowth of his belief that Jewish Americans should identify fully with their country’s history, heroes, culture, and ideals. The text for Brotherhood Sabbath associates God with developments in American history (“We thank Thee, O God, for having taught the founders of our Republic laws that safeguard the equal rights of all citizens and impose equal obligations upon all” [p. 539]) and reflects well Kaplan’s view that all things that contribute to human moral progress are the product of divine forces. The association of God with American history is reinforced further by the use of “El Male” Rahamim to commemorate the American war dead. The service for Memorial Day expresses the hope that the example of those who were willing to die for the protection of the United States “impel us to make our country great, its laws just and wise, its culture deep and true, its economy productive, equitable and free, and its religion profound and pure. . . . Then will no sacrifice for preserving the nation be too high a price to pay” [pp. 541–542]. These services show the same concern for ethical issues evident throughout the *Sabbath Prayer Book*, and the linking of God to America gives the quest for American civil rights a religious significance that helps render responsible American citizenship fully compatible with Jewish values.

The prayer in the *Sabbath Prayer Book* makes American democracy sacred. In June 1945, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada not only excommunicated Kaplan—by invoking the *cherem*, the ancient ban of excommunication—but burned the *Sabbath Prayer Book* as well. This was reported in a story published in *Time* magazine:



In solemn session in Manhattan last week, the Union called the prayer book a compound of “atheism, heresy and disbelief” and hurled at Dr. Kaplan (who is not a member of the Union) a proclamation of excommunication—first in its history. Then, after Rabbi Israel Rosenberg, president of the Union, banned the Kaplan-edited prayers from all synagogues, an excited young rabbi set fire to a copy of the book.<sup>82</sup>

This is one of several issues that brought Mordecai Kaplan into conflict with Orthodox Judaism.<sup>83</sup> This tension continues to this day. For instance, in 1990, Arthur Green, a scholar of Hasidism and president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, stated the Reconstructionist position that belief in the Jews as the “chosen” people was “mythic”:

I certainly do not want to say that our ancestors were lying to me when they asserted chosenness, or that they were inaccurately recording their impressions of the relationship they had with God . . . [but] I cannot give them more than that. . . . “God has chosen Israel” is a *mythic statement*. . . . This is the shared private religious speech of the Jewish People . . . [not] a historical reality.<sup>84</sup>

The *Sabbath Prayer Book* has since been superseded, first by the old *Kol Haneshamah*, and now by the new *Kol Haneshamah* series. The prayer for America in the old *Kol Haneshamah* is as follows:

#### TORAH SERVICE: PRAYER FOR THE COUNTRY

Sovereign of the universe, mercifully receive our prayer for our land and its government. Let your blessing pour out on this land and on all officials of this country who are occupied, in good faith, with the public needs. Instruct them from your Torah’s laws, enable them to understand your principles of justice, so that peace and tranquility, happiness and freedom, might never turn away from our land. Please, WISE ONE, God of the life-breath of all flesh, waken your spirit within all inhabitants of our land, and plant among the peoples of different nationalities and faiths who dwell here, love and brotherhood, peace and friendship. Uproot from their hearts all hatred and enmity, all jealousy and vying for supremacy. Fulfill the yearning of all the people of our country to speak proudly in its honor. Fulfill their desire to see it become a light to all nations. Therefore, may it be your will, that our land should be a blessing to all inhabitants of the globe. Cause to dwell among all peoples friendship and freedom. And soon fulfill the vision of your prophet: “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Let them learn no longer ways of war.” And let us say: Amen.<sup>85</sup>

The new *Kol Haneshamah* prayer book series includes Louis Ginzberg’s prayer for America. Although Ginzberg’s name does not appear after this

prayer for the American government (yet remains a universal prayer that may be invoked on behalf of any just government), “A Prayer for our country” [sic] appears on page 148:

Our God and God of our ancestors: We ask Your blessings for our country—for its government, for its leaders and advisors, and for all who exercise just and rightful authority. Teach them insights from Your Torah, that they may administer all affairs of state fairly, that peace and security, happiness and prosperity, justice and freedom may forever abide in our midst.

Creator of all flesh, bless all the inhabitants of our country with Your spirit. May citizens of all races and creeds forge a common bond in true harmony, to banish hatred and bigotry, and to safeguard the ideals and free institutions that are the pride and glory of our country.

May this land, under Your providence, be an influence for good throughout the world, uniting all people in peace and freedom—helping them to fulfill the vision of Your prophet: “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” And let us say, Amen.<sup>86</sup>

This prayer is immediately followed, on page 149, by “A prayer for the State of Israel (*Siddur Sim Shalom*, page 149)” [sic].

## Jewish Americanism: The “Cult of Synthesis”

Jewish prayers for America have a living resonance. Various *siddurs* were surveyed in this chapter, for the simple reason that “one of the most comprehensive and authoritative (but not systematic) statements of Jewish theology is embedded in the *siddur*.”<sup>87</sup> Earlier in this chapter, a Reform rabbi was cited, who said: “Second only to the Torah, the *siddur* (prayer book) *expresses the ideology of our people*.”<sup>88</sup> The results of the present writer’s survey of Jewish prayers of America has yielded this unexpected result: From the fact that Louis Ginzberg’s “A Prayer for Our Country” is recited in every Conservative synagogue every Sabbath,<sup>89</sup> and presumably also in every Reconstructionist Sabbath service, it would appear that the American Jewish vision of America was best expressed by this singular prayer. If the present writer can take this liberty, then the Jewish vision of America that Ginzberg’s prayer translates into may be reduced to the following principles:

### JEWISH AMERICANS’ VISION OF AMERICA

1. As faithful Jews, we are, each and all, loyal Americans.
2. We have the best interests of America at heart.
3. We call upon our government officials to be just and right in their exercise of legitimate authority.

4. We encourage our leaders to draw upon the wisdom enshrined in the Torah.
5. May peace and security, happiness and prosperity, justice and freedom, one day, reign supreme in America.
6. We seek God's blessings on all Americans, irrespective of creed.
7. In America, may all races and creeds live in true harmony.
8. We seek to banish all forms of hatred and bigotry.
9. We seek to safeguard our country's ideals and free institutions—the pride and glory of America.
10. May America be an influence for good throughout the world, uniting all people in peace and freedom.
11. May Providence guide America in realizing Isaiah's vision of universal peace.

These Jewish principles, expressed as universals, are all consonant, and indeed resonate, with cherished American values. They exemplify Jewish Americanism at its finest.

Jonathan D. Sarna describes the phenomenon of Jewish Americanism, in which American Jews today merge their American and Jewish identities, which he calls the “cult of synthesis.”<sup>90</sup> By “cult,” Sarna means “a collective veneration or worship . . . in which the collectivity is defined and united by its common devotional practice.”<sup>91</sup> Noting the synergy between American Judaism and American civil religion, Sarna develops his thesis of the “cult of synthesis,” and adduces abundant evidence for it:

This understanding of the American Jewish experience—the belief that Judaism and Americanism reinforce one another, the two traditions converging in a common path—encapsulates a central theme in American Jewish culture that may be termed “the cult of synthesis.” Dating back well over a century, it reflects an ongoing effort on the part of American Jews to interweave their “Judaism” with their “Americanism” in an attempt to fashion for themselves some unified, “synthetic” whole. Anyone even remotely connected with American Jewish life is familiar with this theme, which has elsewhere been described as a central tenet of American Jewish “civil religion.”<sup>92</sup>

Sarna's thesis, in part, is that “such diverse American Jewish religious leaders as Leo Jung, Samuel Belkin, Abba Hillel Silver, Jacob Rader Marcus, Nelson Glueck, Louis Finkelstein, Simon Greenberg, and Robert Gordis all argued in various ways for the compatibility of Judaism and American democracy.”<sup>93</sup> Mordecai Kaplan—who “at one point, explicitly sought to redefine America from a Jewish perspective”—echoed the same idea in this memorable way: “The American religion of democracy has room for Judaism, and Jewish religion has room for American democracy.”<sup>94</sup>

Among others, Sarna singles out for distinction Horace Kallen<sup>95</sup>—the father of “cultural pluralism” (now known as “multiculturalism”). Horace Kallen (1882–1974), a Jewish pragmatist philosopher, invented the term “cultural pluralism” in 1907 at Oxford University, in conversations that he had with Alain Locke (1885–1954, member of the Baha’i community since 1918), who, earlier that year, had won national acclaim as the first African American Rhodes Scholar. Kallen reports that “we had a race problem because Rhodes Scholars from the South were bastards,” who “had a Thanksgiving dinner which I refused to attend because they refused to have Locke.” Traumatized, Locke mused: “What difference does the difference [of race] make? We are all alike Americans.” And so, “in arguing out those questions the formulae, then phrases, developed—‘cultural pluralism,’ ‘the right to be different,’” writes Kallen. Yet it was not until 1924 when the term “cultural pluralism”—the antipode of “the melting pot”—first appeared in print. In *Culture and Democracy in the United States* (in which Kallen’s essay, “Democracy versus the Melting Pot” is reprinted, with minor changes), Kallen states: “Cultural Pluralism . . . is the view that democracy is an essential prerequisite to culture, that culture can be and sometimes is a fine flowering of democracy, and that the history of the relation of the two in the United States exhibits this fact.” The counter-metaphor that Kallen proposes is that of the philharmonic. “American civilization” may be envisioned as “the perfection of coöperative harmonies” of “European civilization”—a “multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind” in which “every type of instrument has its specific *timbre* and *tonality*” to create a veritable “symphony of civilization.”<sup>96</sup>

The phenomenon of Jewish Americanism arcs across all major forms of American Judaism. In other words, Jewish Americanism is not the preserve of one Jewish movement within the United States. Sarna cites the late eminent sociologist, Charles Liebman, who, in discussing the “major ideas, symbols, and institutions arousing the deepest loyalties and passions of American Jews,” declared: “There is nothing incompatible between being a good Jew and a good American, or between Jewish and American standards of behavior. In fact, for a Jew, the better an American one is, the better Jew one is.”<sup>97</sup> So pervasive is the cult of synthesis that it “actually permeated all of the major movements and ideologies of American Judaism.”<sup>98</sup> Sarna registers this point absolutely and emphatically: “All shared the firm belief that Americanism and Judaism reinforced one another.”<sup>99</sup>

To be sure, significant differences exist among American Jews today as to precisely how this salutary cultural symbiosis works best, in that American Jews “take it as an article of faith that ‘American’ and ‘Jew’ *can* be reconciled. What they debate is how the grand synthesis may best be accomplished, not whether it is achievable in the first place.”<sup>100</sup> To what extent Jewish Americanism has influenced other faith-communities is hard to say. What can definitely be said is that American Judaism has, at heart, wholly embraced American values. In fact, Jewish Americanism is a salient characteristic of American Judaism generally. The two go hand-in-hand.



Figure 6.2. Touro Synagogue, Newport, Rhode Island. America's oldest synagogue (1763) and a national historic site. Note American flag on left. A symbol of religious freedom for all Americans, the Touro Synagogue was commemorated by a postage stamp, issued in 1982 (commemorating President George Washington's 250th birthday), quoting these immortal words in his celebrated letter to the "Hebrew congregation at Newport" in 1790:

*"To bigotry, no sanction. To persecution, no assistance."*

(Photo by Swampyank at en.wikipedia, July 15, 2009. Black & white version of color original.)

## Chapter 6 Update: A Jewish Toast to America

*To us the United States of America stands as the foremost among nations, granting the greatest liberty to all who dwell here. Therefore we grace our table with the National flag. . . .*

*The Fourth of July is the American Passover. Thanksgiving is the American Feast of Tabernacles. It is therefore quite in keeping with the service this evening to pledge our country. In raising this third glass of wine to our lips, let us pray that God will ever protect our land, that here liberty may forever dwell, that peace may abide within her borders and prosperity within her homes.*

—Rabbi Dr. J. Leonard Levy (Pittsburgh, 1903)<sup>101</sup>

*To this day, many Jews in the United States conclude the Passover seder with the singing of the hymn, America.*

—Jonathan D. Sarna (2008)<sup>102</sup>

On Nov. 2, 2011, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks opened the U.S. Senate with an Invocation.<sup>103</sup>

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is former Chief Rabbi of United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, a position he held for 22 years until September 1, 2013. At the invitation of Senator Joseph I. Lieberman, Rabbi Sacks served as as Guest Chaplain, a distinct honor. On this occasion, he became the first UK Chief Rabbi to deliver an Invocation prayer before the Senate. The full text of the prayer has been published. The prayer ends: “Beloved God, bless the members of this United States Congress and guide their deliberations, that they may govern this great nation with wisdom and justice, grace and compassion, bringing honor to your name, and your blessing to humankind.”<sup>104</sup> Apparently this was a prayer for the occasion, rather than a standard occasional prayer. Nonetheless, there is a hint of America’s world role, by implying that enlightened decisions by the U.S. Senate might be one agency for bringing God’s “blessing to humankind.” What is implicit here is made explicit elsewhere, as American Jews continue to pray for, support, and contribute to the progress of “this great nation.”

The *siddur* (“order” of prayers), or Hebrew prayer book “is the most important book in Jewish history and in some ways the most influential.”<sup>105</sup> Jonathan Sarna makes the general observation on Jewish prayers for America: “Close examination of these prayers, as we shall see, sheds light on the Americanization of Judaism and on the changing relationship between American Jews and the state.”<sup>106</sup> What else can be said?

Historically, Judaism upholds patriotism as a duty. The common synagogue practice of reciting a prayer for the welfare of the government during Sabbath services derives from Jeremiah 29:7: “Seek the welfare of the city to which I have caused you to go in exile, and pray to Adonai on its behalf; for your welfare is bound up in its welfare” (CJV). Sometimes Jewish prayers for the government have been seen as an “accommodation” or even as a “smokescreen.” Neither of these descriptions applies to Jewish prayers for the government of United States of America, because such prayers arise from the heart of the American Jewish experience which, for the most part, has been positive.

Since there is no supreme religious authority in American Judaism, American Jews have freedom to innovate. What Jonathan Sarna has called a “cult of synthesis” was previously discussed earlier in this chapter. Distinct from “synthesis” is a process of Jewish Americanization that Sylvia Barack Fishman calls “coalescence.”<sup>107</sup> Coalescence supersedes adaptation. Adaptation is a process of cultural accommodation with elements of the original (Jewish) and “foreign” (American) value systems, with an awareness of

differences between the two. In the process of coalescence, elements from both cultures merge, such that there is no longer any conscious awareness of separation between the two.<sup>108</sup> The result is that “Judaism is Americanized and America is Judaized.”<sup>109</sup>

In 2008, Sarna wrote a book of advice, *A Time to Every Purpose: Letters to a Young Jew*.<sup>110</sup> Early in the book, Sarna recounts that his wife, Ima, as a little girl, used a Passover *haggadah* (“the telling” of Exodus, recited on the first two nights of Passover) prepared by Dr. J. Leonard Levy, her grandfather’s rabbi, in Pittsburgh. Dr. Levy was rabbi of Rodef Shalom Congregation from 1901–1917. Rabbi Levy’s 39-page *haggadah* was nontraditional. It called for placing an American flag on the *seder* (ritual and ceremonial dinner) table. Part of the ritual included this remarkable liturgical dialogue:

Child: Where do we find civil, political, and religious liberty united today?

Reader: Here in America. The fathers of this country fought against oppression that here all men should be free and equal before the law; free to worship God as their conscience dictated. To us the United States of America stands as the foremost among nations, granting the greatest liberty to all who dwell here. Therefore we grace our table with the National flag. . . .

The Pilgrim Fathers landed here inspired by Israel’s wandering to go out even to the wilderness and worship God. The immortal Declaration of Independence is the Great Charter announced before Pharaoh by Moses. The Abolitionists are the product of the Bible . . . The Fourth of July is the American Passover. Thanksgiving is the American Feast of Tabernacles.

It is therefore quite in keeping with the service this evening to pledge our country. In raising this third glass of wine to our lips, let us pray that God will ever protect our land, that here liberty may forever dwell, that peace may abide within her borders and prosperity within her homes. .<sup>111</sup>

This Passover *haggadah* is something of a Jewish “toast to America.” Judaism in America is a success story, notwithstanding (and withstanding) episodic anti-Semitism along the way. American Jewish history demonstrates a profound compatibility between Jewish and American values—even to the extent of hybridizing Jewish and American identity. These identities generally are seen as complementary rather than conflicting. Jews have long declared their public allegiance to the United States of America, and have enriched American culture in all areas of civic life, as historian Jonathan Sarna observes: “All major movements and ideologies within American Judaism insisted that Americanism and Judaism reinforced each other, and annually, on days like Thanksgiving, this message was reinforced, as if in an effort to de-Christianize America’s cultural boundaries so as to render Jews more welcome.”<sup>112</sup> Such synergy between Judaism and American democracy is a cause of celebration.

This chapter update will close by highlighting a 2014 journal article. In “Race, Religion, or Ethnicity?: Situating Jews in the American Scene,” Annalise Glauz-Todrank argues “that scholarship on Jewish American identity is typically both attentive to and itself deeply shaped by the *myths* that comprise dominant American conceptions of identity, such as those that inform and construct the social categories: religion, race, and ethnicity.”<sup>113</sup> This includes the “the American origin myth regarding religious pluralism,”<sup>114</sup> “the myth of their [early Americans’] tolerance,”<sup>115</sup> “the myth of American liberalism,”<sup>116</sup> and other “myths about Americanness” as well.<sup>117</sup> Such myths represent, yet do not exhaust, the constellation of myths that, taken together, collectively define American national identity.

Historically, Jewish Americans constructed their dual identities as Jews and Americans through the language of religion. Within the broad sweep of national identity narratives, the American origin myth holds freedom of religion as a foundational principle and structural cornerstone. Thus religion, as a social category in the American context, is pluralistic in nature. Yet the prevailing American notion of religion proceeds from a largely “Protestant baseline.”<sup>118</sup> On the part of Jewish Americans, this requires a certain degree of religious accommodation to pluralism as a civic and religious value, including an explicit and highly visible commitment to it. As one illustration of this, Glauz-Todrank cites Beth Wenger’s 2012 book, *History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage* to underscore how American Jews creatively, strategically, and effectively wrote themselves into the American script:

Participating in national celebrations provided Jews the opportunity to declare their allegiance to the United States while also expressing their vision of what the nation should be. Jews seized public moments as occasions to write themselves into the narratives of American history and to make themselves and their culture pivotal actors in the creation of the nation.<sup>119</sup>

Here, Wenger notes that Jewish Americans took national holidays as occasions for publicly affirming their American loyalty. This included celebrating such quintessentially American civic holidays as Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July in synagogues and Jewish community centers. Moreover, American Jews creatively wove themselves into the warp and woof of the American social tapestry by threading Jewish actors into the fabric of American history as it relates to the very formation of America itself.

As a diaspora haven, America’s “golden door” allowed Jewish immigrants to settle and make new lives in America. While the streets were not “paved in gold,” “golden cities” such as Miami and Los Angeles saw the rise of prosperous Jewish communities, accompanied by the advent and spread of the “synagogue-center” (i.e., the so-called “shul with a pool”). As for a Jewish “theology of America,” one might expect that America, as Israel’s greatest ally, might be accorded some kind of providential special place within the



grand scheme of things. Since its establishment in 1948, the State of Israel has been strongly supported by America, financially and militarily. Thus the “Holy Land” (the Land of Israel) looks to the “Golden Land” (America) as one of its pillars. Therefore, one would expect that some kind of divine significance might attach to this crucial international fact. But the present writer could not locate such sentiments in the literature consulted. Jewish appreciation of America is obviously widespread. Notwithstanding the emergence and efflorescence of the of Jewish theology in America, America has not been invested with anything resembling a divine mandate.

And so, on November 19, 2013, Jonathan Sarna proposed that the two counties take stock of “this long symbiotic relationship between Golden Land and Promised Land,” in which “each has complemented and nourished the other.” However, since the strength and vitality of this relationship has weakened somewhat in recent years, Sarna suggests that Jews in both countries “need to strengthen the ties that bind Jews together.” “For Israelis,” Sarna proposes, that requires . . . becoming acquainted with the American Jewish experience, which is barely taught in Israeli schools and universities.” “For American Jews,” Sarna goes on to say, “it requires *a new vision of the relationship with Israel*—one that is less imperious, paternalistic, and insular, and instead more generous in its understanding of how others have strengthened American Jewry, even as American Jewry has strengthened them.” In fine, America and Israel represent “two great options in Jewish life.” Therefore “each should nourish the other.”<sup>120</sup>

## Notes

1. Lecture delivered before the Theological and Religious Library Association of Cincinnati, January 7, 1869. See Isaac Mayer Wise, “Our Country’s Place in History.” *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, 224–234 [224, 226, 231, 234].
2. Qtd. in Beth S. Wenger, “Making American Civilization Jewish: Mordecai Kaplan’s Civil Religion.” *Jewish Social Studies* 12.2 (2006): 56–63 [61].
3. Eli Lederhendler, “America: A Vision in a Jewish Mirror.” *Jewish Responses to Modernity: New Voices in America and Eastern Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 104–139 [113].
4. James H. Moorhead, “‘God’s Right Arm’? Minority Faiths and Protestant Visions of America.” *Minority Faiths and the American Protestant Mainstream*. Ed. Jonathan D. Sarna (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 335–361 [356].
5. Sam B. Girgus, “The New Covenant: The Jews and the Myth of America.” *The American Self: Myth, Ideology, and Popular Culture*. Ed. idem (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 105–123; Girgus, *The New Covenant: Jewish Writers and the American Idea* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).
6. Jonathan D. Sarna, “Free-Market Judaism.”

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*Figure 7.1.* Conference Center of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, balcony level (3rd floor), Salt Lake City, Utah.  
(Public domain. Photo taken April 29, 2006.)



## Chapter 7

# Mormon Myths and Visions of America

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*I established the Constitution of the land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose.*

—Jesus Christ (in Mormonism)<sup>1</sup>

*The city of Zion spoken of by David, in the one hundred and second Psalm, will be built upon the land of America.*

—Joseph Smith (1833)<sup>2</sup>

Mormons have exotic mythic and visionary accounts of America.

The word “Mormons” is the popular name for followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). (LDS is the “revealed” name of the church.) LDS was founded by the prophet Joseph Smith (1805–1844) in 1830. Since that time, the Mormon church, by virtue of its missionary zeal, has spread to many parts of the world, its far-flung membership thus constituting a global community. On June 24, 2007, President Gordon B. Hinckley (the fifteenth Mormon president), addressing the New Mission Presidents’ Seminar, announced that LDS church membership had reached 13 million (the official 2013 figure is 15,082,028),<sup>3</sup> with more Mormons residing outside the United States than within, thus reflecting the global breadth and diversity of its worldwide membership.<sup>4</sup> As the fourth largest “church” in the United States by some accounts,<sup>5</sup> the Mormons are a sizable body of religious adherents who communally share religious convictions about America.

What is Mormonism? One may answer this question through introducing three major dimensions of Mormon doctrine and praxis: (1) restorationism; (2) perfectionism; (3) millenarianism. *Restorationism* (also known as primitivism) is the reestablishment of the original Christian church, as indicated in Article 6 of the *Articles of Faith*, a Mormon creed: “We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles,

prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth.”<sup>6</sup> *Millenarianism* is the belief in a future, 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth, as taught in Article 10 of the *Articles of Faith*: “We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion will be built upon this [the American] continent; that Christ will reign personally upon the earth; and that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory.”<sup>7</sup> *Perfectionism* is basically a doctrine of eternal progression, of becoming more divine (God-like) in the process—i.e., the possibility of man becoming equal with Christ and God—as promised in *Doctrine and Covenants*: “Wherefore, as it is written, they are *gods*, even the *sons of God*—”;<sup>8</sup> “And then shall the angels be crowned with the glory of his might, and the saints shall be filled with his glory, and receive their inheritance and be made *equal* with him.”<sup>9</sup> Mormon restorationism has been analyzed, *inter alia*, by Jan Shipps,<sup>10</sup> Mormon millenarianism by Grant Underwood,<sup>11</sup> and Mormon perfectionism by John Brooke.<sup>12</sup> These categories will be variously applied throughout this chapter. A brief explanation of each category follows.

*Restorationism*: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints arose during the season of revivals known as the Second Great Awakening. (The first Great Awakening, 1725–1765, was followed by the Second Great Awakening, 1795–1860.) Established in 1830, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints presents itself as true Christianity restored. This is a form of primitivism, which is belief in the necessity of restoring Christ’s apostolic or “primitive” church. As an end-times religion, Mormonism sees itself as “that old-time religion.”

In nineteenth-century America, the time became ripe for the great Restoration commenced by Smith and his followers, supported by LDS restoration scriptures, especially the *Book of Mormon*. The Restoration was long overdue, for Christianity is said to have undergone a “Great Apostasy” during the apostolic age.<sup>13</sup> Preparations for the Restoration began in 1820, through the appearance of two divine personages to Joseph Smith, then a youth, on his family’s farm near Palmyra, New York.<sup>14</sup> In this First Vision (also called the “Grove Experience”), both God the Father and Jesus personally appeared to Joseph Smith. (In Joseph Smith’s original 1832 version of the First Vision, however, only one Personage, the Son, appeared to the young seer.)<sup>15</sup> The First Vision may be seen as an “Annunciation,” preparing the youthful Smith for a prophetic vocation. In this vision, the 14-year-old youth was told not to join any churches of the day. This, in and of itself, implied that Jesus did not recognize any current form of Christianity as fully authentic. Other contemporary movements were making similar claims.

The First Vision is foundational, for it not only establishes Joseph Smith’s prophetic credentials in the eye of Mormons, but discloses the reality and nature of God as well. The significance of the First Vision in Mormon belief is paramount, as one Mormon historian notes: “Its importance is second only to belief in the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>16</sup> God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph Smith as celestial human beings. This apparition

was real and underscores Mormon perfectionism, which is related to the Restoration. In one sense, the First Vision may be viewed as a restoration of the true knowledge of God. There was a restoration of the priestly office and its charismatic prerogative as well. This took place on May 15, 1829.

The Restoration is “the signal event of the post-biblical age.”<sup>17</sup> On April 6, 1830, Joseph Smith is said to have completed the process of restoring the true church to its pristine form. This was an ecclesiastical restoration. According to Shipps, there were actually three types of restoration: (1) restoration of church and priesthood; (2) restoration of Israel; and (3) “the restoration of all things,” referring to the final overlay of perfectionist tenets in the closing years of Joseph Smith’s ministry.<sup>18</sup> Here, one sees the three major dimensions used in this framework of analysis: Mormon restorationism, millenarianism, and perfectionism.

Because of its paramount importance, a brief overview of Mormon priestly orders is needed. One Mormon historian’s description of the restoration of the priesthoods that purportedly existed in primitive Christianity, which the Mormon church has now restored, illustrates this key LDS truth claim:

This restoration was effected by the Lord through the Prophet Joseph Smith, who, together with Oliver Cowdery, in 1829, received the Aaronic Priesthood (the Levitical priesthood) under the hands of John the Baptist; and later the Melchizedek Priesthood under the hands of the former-day apostles, Peter, James, and John.<sup>19</sup>

Of these two orders, that of Melchizedek is greater, having the same authority as the righteous king and high priest after whom the priesthood was named.

In the LDS Church, however, there are actually three grand orders of priesthood: the Melchizedek, the Aaronic, and the Patriarchal.<sup>20</sup> As the name implies, the patriarchal order includes the right of worthy, ordained fathers to preside over their descendants for all time. Women are not ordained into priesthood. The issue of Mormon priesthood takes on added significance, considering the priesthood ban for all black males—a policy that was rescinded (but not repudiated)—by a divine revelation in 1978. This racial dimension to the Mormon priesthood will be discussed later in this chapter. Both the Aaronic Priesthood<sup>21</sup> and the Melchizedek Priesthood<sup>22</sup> are considered essential to theocracy, or the government of God, which takes place in the Millennium.

*Millenarianism:* Mormonism has introduced America into the millennial scheme of things. Today—which is to say, in these “latter days”—the first church is now the last church, being the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Because it sees itself as the restoration of original Christianity, Mormonism is the only true church: “The Latter-day Saints declare their high claim to the true Church organization, similar in all essentials

to the organization effected by Christ among the Jews.”<sup>23</sup> Embodying both the doctrine and ecclesial structure of the apostolic church, the primitivism of the LDS church is both normative and jurisdictional. Through his millennialism, Joseph Smith’s primitivism became, in fact, a full-blown dispensationalism, transforming all traditional notions of Christianity.

*Perfectionism:* As the term implies, perfectionism (also known as Hermeticism in relation to Mormonism) is the belief in the perfectibility of human character and nature. Typically, this refers to the quest for immortality, both spiritual and physical. LDS doctrine teaches a progressive path to deification. As Joseph Smith himself states: “Every man who reigns in celestial glory is a God to his dominions.”<sup>24</sup> “Hermeticism,” in Brooke’s view, “explains the more exotic features of the inner logic of Mormon theology.”<sup>25</sup> Despite some of the features it has in common with perfectionism generally, Brooke asserts that “the Mormon claim of a revealed restoration ideal has few parallels, and the combination of temple ritual, polygamous marriage, three-tiered heavens, the coequality of spirit and matter, and promise of godhood is essentially unique.”<sup>26</sup>

Latter-day Saints view God the Father in anthropomorphic terms. In a literal reading of Genesis 1:26, man is created in the “image and likeness” of God. Therefore, God must have an image and form as well. According to Joseph Smith, “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit.”<sup>27</sup> God is an exalted man. He stands as the prototype of human potential for perfection. The path to this perfection was not previously known, nor could it be followed, until the true gospel had been restored. This was Joseph Smith’s mission. By means of the Restoration, people can now embark on the path of perfectionism. The primary scriptural source for Mormon perfectionism is the King Follett Discourse (April 7, 1844, funeral sermon preached by Joseph Smith on behalf of Mormon notable Elder King Follett), in which Joseph Smith states, in part:

God Himself who sits enthroned in yonder heavens is a Man like unto one of yourselves—that is the great secret! . . . For I am going to tell you how God came to be God and what sort of a being He is. For we have imagined that God was God from the beginning of all eternity. I will refute that idea and take away the veil so you may see. . . . The first principle of truth and of the Gospel is to know for a certainty the character of God, and that . . . He once was a man like one of us and that God Himself, the Father of us all, once dwelled on an earth the same as Jesus Christ himself did in the flesh and like us.<sup>28</sup>

Put more succinctly, this doctrine is expressed in the oft-quoted couplet by Lorenzo Snow (fifth president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints): “As man now is, God once was; as God is now man may be.”<sup>29</sup> Atonement assures resurrection, but not exaltation. “In its final form,”

Brooke concludes, “the Mormon doctrine of salvation made the gift of grace through faith in Christ’s atonement a necessary condition for salvation but not a sufficient condition.”<sup>30</sup> Mormon soteriology makes a “critical distinction . . . between simple salvation and divine exaltation.”<sup>31</sup> Beyond salvation is exaltation (deification). Exaltation is ultimate salvation.<sup>32</sup>

With this three-dimensional framework of analysis for Mormon doctrine and praxis in place, one can now introduce the *Book of Mormon*—the central Mormon scripture—in which some of the key Mormon myths and visions of America are enshrined.

*The Book of Mormon*: The central Mormon scripture is the *Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*. While acknowledging the traditional Holy Land as, indeed, holy, the *Book of Mormon*, along with other Mormon scriptures, has recast America (and the Americas, that is, the New World as a whole) as a sacred landscape. In other words, in the Mormon view of it, America is the new Holy Land. So what makes America holy, in the Mormon conception of it?

Joseph Smith is said to have both discovered and produced the *Book of Mormon*, which is purportedly “an account written by the hand of Mormon upon plates taken from the Plates of Nephi,” as the title page of the *Book of Mormon* proclaims. These are “gold plates” revealing the “history” of ancient America. This history begins with the prophet Lehi, a Jerusalem-born descendant of Joseph, said to have left Israel and ultimately founded a colony in the New World, some 600 years before Christ. Thus Lehi, not Christopher Columbus, discovered America, as the *Book of Mormon* implies. The subsequent history of Lehi’s progeny in America, the appearance of Jesus Christ in America, and the pre-Columbian history of the American Indians are chronicled in the *Book of Mormon*, which was indelibly, if unintelligibly, inscribed on golden plates.

Shortly after Lehi’s party’s arrival in the New World, family quarrels fragmented clans into two warring nations. Over the 1,000-year period that the *Book of Mormon* chronicles, the saga of these two nations’ decline and fall is told. The signal moment of peace and prosperity came as the result of a visit by the risen, resurrected Jesus Christ to the peoples of ancient America, where He established His church, as in the Old World. For nearly 200 years following Christ’s visit, the church flourished. Over time, however, apostasy set in, as the Christianized inhabitants of ancient America precipitously abandoned Christ’s teachings. Wickedness prevailed, war ensued, and extermination resulted.

Over the course of these centuries, meticulous records were said to have been kept on metal plates. One of the last of these historians was Mormon, an ancient American prophet who abridged this history and inscribed it on gold plates. The last of the ancient American prophets and sole survivor of his now-extinct nation, Moroni, protectively buried the gold plates—which are gilded history, quite literally—in the fifth century. Moroni buried the plates in a hillside, today called the Hill Cumorah, located in Palmyra, New

York. While Moroni's burial of this book reportedly preserved this sacred history, it remained hidden for 14 centuries. How Joseph Smith came to discover this sacred history of America—and how he came to decipher the ancient language it contained—is explained, in Mormon belief, as a divinely inspired series of events.

Born on December 23, 1805, in Sharon, Vermont, Joseph Smith, Jr., was troubled, as a teenager, by the maelstrom of competing faiths and religious conflicts that plagued the churches in America. In 1820, at the age of 14, the young Smith experienced a theophany, or vision of God, which Mormons commonly refer to as “the First Vision.” In 1823, Moroni returned and led young Joseph Smith to the hidden plates. These gold plates were in the temporary custody of Joseph Smith, who, according to Mormon accounts, permitted three men to actually see them and another eight men to handle them. The written testimony of these witnesses follow the *Book of Mormon's* introduction.

Joseph translated the plates in about three months after which he returned them to the angel Moroni. In June 1829, Joseph Smith completed his translation of the plates by means of the Urim and Thummim, a device which, in biblical times, a high priest would wear on his breastplate and by means of which that priest would divine the will of God.<sup>33</sup> Described as “two stones in silver bows,”<sup>34</sup> the Urim and Thummim enabled the prophet to interpret the engravings on the gold plates. It evidently functioned much like a seer stone. The *Book of Mormon* was first published in 1830, with a print run of 5,000 copies at a cost of \$3,000.<sup>35</sup>

When people think of the Mormons, they typically do not think first of Mormons' beliefs about America. True, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has its distinctive doctrines—of restoration, progression, revelation, ordinances, patriarchy, Jesus Christ, and the heavens. In addition to these, Mormonism also has a rich fund of what can properly be called religious myths and visions of America. One could write an entire book on this topic. One Mormon author, E. Douglas Clark, has compiled a book of relevant Mormon texts on the topic of America.<sup>36</sup> The Mormon myth of America covers its past, present, and future. Generally, however, Mormon sources consistently portray the destiny of America as glorious. To inquiring minds, while the Mormon vision of America may be “too good to be true,” the existence of such beliefs about America is a fascinating social phenomenon.

The LDS Church has exhibited a duality of attitudes towards America. As historian Richard Bushman succinctly states: “The American land was given an honored place in *Book of Mormon* sacred history, but American civilization was not.”<sup>37</sup> Moreover: “Mormon optimism arose not from romantic hope for America but from the faith grounded in the *Book of Mormon* that God would redeem the land from the evil that prevailed there.”<sup>38</sup>

America, in Mormon belief, has spiritual roots, a divine mandate for the present, and a theocratic future. In the words of one scholar, Mormons

added “to the disembodied outline of the millennial dream the firm contours of America.”<sup>39</sup>

## The Garden of Eden Myth

Unique as it is, the LDS Church is not without precedents. Primitivism inspired restorationist churches in America, such as the Churches of Christ (also known as “Campbellites”) and the Disciples of Christ. That the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sees itself as the one, true church is obviously a truth-claim that raises center-and-periphery issues with respect to mainstream Christianity. Mormon primitivism is not simply a restoration of the primitive Church as conceived by Joseph Smith. LDS primitivism extends as far back as the Garden of Eden, where salvation history begins.

America, in Mormon belief, has had a special place in salvation history since primordial times. America was once Paradise. Brigham Young, who succeeded Mormon prophet-founder Joseph Smith after the latter was assassinated in 1844, disclosed that the Garden of Eden was located in the heart of ancient America: “In the beginning, after this earth was prepared for man, the Lord commenced his work upon what is now called the American continent, where the Garden of Eden was made.”<sup>40</sup> A direct link between the Latter Days and creation resides in the Mormon belief that the Garden of Eden was located in what is now Independence, in Jackson County, Missouri. “Independence was to be the location of Enoch’s city,” Brooke writes, “because it had once been Paradise itself. From this Garden of Eden, centrally located in the North American continent, Adam had been expelled to ‘Adam ondi Ahman,’ where he gathered his posterity, and from where Noah had sailed his ark to Palestine during the Flood.”<sup>41</sup> Official LDS statements back this claim: President Heber C. Kimball (1801–1868), former counselor in the First Presidency, pinpointed Eden’s precise location: “The spot chosen for the garden of Eden was Jackson County, in the state of Missouri, where [the city of] Independence now stands; it was occupied in the morn of creation by Adam.”<sup>42</sup>

## The Lost Tribes Myth

The Mormon myth of America’s pre-Columbian history is also racial. The *Book of Mormon* is at once a history of the Native Americans and a history of Israel in America,<sup>43</sup> because Indians were Israelites unawares (but not at first unaware of the Israelite heritage, according to LDS doctrine). “Independence was to be the location of Enoch’s city,” Brooke writes, “because it had once been Paradise itself. From this Garden of Eden, centrally located in the North American continent, Adam had been expelled to ‘Adam ondi Ahman,’ where he gathered his posterity, and from where Noah had sailed

his ark to Palestine during the Flood. Thus three waves of Old World immigrants—Jaredites, Nephites, and Euro-Americans—had come to the New World in search of Paradise.”<sup>44</sup>

Prior to Smith’s discovery and translation of the *Book of Mormon*, efforts had been made to historicize the legend of the ten Lost Tribes, Jews who the Assyrians exiled in 722 BCE and who mysteriously vanished from history. In the biblical account, all Jewish tribes, except for Judah and Benjamin, were exiled to Halah and Habor by the River Gozan.<sup>45</sup> There has been much speculation ever since as to the fate of these Ten Tribes, but the most famous has been their identification with Native Americans, as conjectured by the Amsterdam Rabbi Manasseh ben Israel in his *Hope of Israel* (1650). The same idea stood at the center of Ethan Smith’s work, *View of the Hebrews, or the Tribes of Israel in America* (1823).<sup>46</sup>

Given this background, it is evident that the *Book of Mormon* has a context. But the *Book of Mormon* does not speculate on their fate beyond the simple conjecture that the ten Lost Tribes had probably migrated to the northern climes.<sup>47</sup> “And they who are in the north countries,” Joseph Smith proclaimed, “shall come in remembrance before the Lord” where “their prophets shall hear his voice” and “shall smite the rocks, and the ice shall flow.”<sup>48</sup>

The *Book of Mormon* focuses, not on the ten Lost Tribes, but on the Jewish prophet Lehi,<sup>49</sup> from the Tribe of Joseph through his son Manasseh. Lehi is said to have departed for America with a tiny band of Jews, who left from Jerusalem, not Assyria, 125 years after the Assyrian conquest. Indians are therefore Israelites. According to the *Book of Mormon*, America was first populated by three groups of emigrants: the Jaredites, the Nephites, and the Mulekites. The Jaredites came first, followed by the Nephites and Mulekites. The Jaredites were led by a prophet known only as the “brother of Jared.” After the dispersion that followed the Tower of Babel, around 2250 BCE by some Mormon estimates (the date is not essential), the Jaredites set sail in “barges” towards the “Promised Land” (America).

Evidently, there were eight such vessels, each illuminated by two luminous stones, “white and clear,”<sup>50</sup> placed fore and aft. By this mysterious technology, these ships had to withstand all the vicissitudes of an arduous, transoceanic journey that lasted 344 days. After the Jaredites came the Nephites. They were led to America by the Hebrew prophet Lehi, around 589 BCE.<sup>51</sup> According to the *Book of Mormon*, soon after his resurrection, Jesus Christ appeared in America to both the Nephites (descendants of Nephi, a great prophet who lived around 600 BCE) and the Lamanites. Jesus said: “And behold, this people will I establish in this land, unto the fulfilling of the covenant which I made with your father Jacob; and it shall be a New Jerusalem. And the powers of heaven shall be in the midst of this people; yea, even I will be in the midst of you’.”<sup>52</sup> By asserting Israelite origins for Native Americans, with Jesus Christ having appeared to them, the *Book of Mormon* has succeeded in establishing America as another Holy Land.



By this mysterious technology, these ships had to withstand all the vicissitudes of an arduous, transoceanic journey. They had to endure tempests and fierce winds, stirring up “mountain waves” that buffeted and, quite literally, “buried” the ships.<sup>53</sup> To make a long story short, the Jaredites became extinct, due to their wickedness, around 590 BCE. The last great Jaredite prophet and chronicler was Ether, whose history, *The Book of Ether*, was recorded on 24 gold plates.<sup>54</sup> Ether foretold the future establishment of “a New Jerusalem upon this land [America].”<sup>55</sup> But this vision concerned another people entirely, for the Jaredites were on the brink of extinction.

After the Jaredites came the Nephites. They were led to America by the Hebrew prophet Lehi, around 589 BCE.<sup>56</sup> Rival claims to prophetic office advanced by Laman, eldest son of Lehi, and by Nephi, Lehi’s designated successor, led to an eventual division between the Lamanites and Nephites (named after these two sons of Lehi). The Nephites had first occupied the southern climes, while the “Land of Mulek” (after descendants of Mulek, the “son of Zedekiah”) was to the north. Internal divisions split the Nephites into the Nephites and Lamanites. Nephi became the founder of a flourishing civilization of farmers and city builders. But Laman broke away and led a nomadic band of outlaws who continually menaced the Nephites, in consequence of which the Lamanites were cursed with dark skin.<sup>57</sup> The Mulekites eventually merged with the Nephites. The inhabitants of the New World were believed to have all been the direct descendants of the patriarch Joseph.

According to the *Book of Mormon*, soon after his resurrection, Jesus Christ appeared in America to both the Nephites (descendants of Nephi, a great prophet who lived around 600 BCE) and the Lamanites. Jesus said: “And behold, this people will I establish in this land, unto the fulfilling of the covenant which I made with your father Jacob; and it shall be a New Jerusalem. And the powers of heaven shall be in the midst of this people; yea, even I will be in the midst of you’.”<sup>58</sup> In his synopsis of the writings of Ether, the prophet Moroni writes: “Behold, Ether saw the days of Christ, and he spake concerning a New Jerusalem upon this land [America].”<sup>59</sup>

Distant traces of historical memory of Christ’s appearance in the Americas are said to have been preserved in selected ethnographic accounts of culture heroes, especially those myths surrounding the Toltec civilization, Quetzalcoatl.<sup>60</sup> A Mormon film, *Christ in America*, treats the legend of Quetzalcoatl as an ancient memory of Christ’s visitation to the New World as sober fact. LDS apologists still have to contend with skeptics and critics, who point to alleged anthropological anachronisms in the text (horses, wheat, steel swords, etc.). But faith in both the *Book of Mormon* and Joseph Smith’s inspired translation of it sustain the authority of the text. This faith is undergirded by perceived evidences of ancient Judaic characteristics that the *Book of Mormon* exhibits, independent of any apologetic approach.

Eventually, the savage Lamanites slaughtered the Nephites. Subsequently, the Lamanites “became dark in skin and benighted in spirit.”<sup>61</sup> Native Americans are said to be their descendants. The last set of records of the Nephites was written by Mormon (c. 333 CE) and buried in the Hill Ramah (Jaredite name for Hill Cumorah). The record of these peoples is contained in abridged form in the *Book of Mormon*, said to have been written in “reformed Egyptian” and inscribed on gold plates, which Joseph Smith translated. It was Mormon’s son, Moroni (whom Mormons identify as the angel of Revelation 14:6, although Bruce McConkie and others hold that this verse could refer to other angels as well), who appeared to Joseph Smith to lead him to discover where the plates had been hidden. They were deposited in a stone vault and buried in the Hill Cumorah, near the village of Manchester, New York. The prophet came into possession of these gold plates on September 22, 1827. A facsimile of the characters exists in a circular published with the heading, “Stick of Joseph taken from the Hand of Ephraim: A Correct Copy of the Characters taken from the Plates [of] the *Book of Mormon*.”<sup>62</sup> This “stick of Joseph” was added to the “stick of Judah”—a euphemism for the Bible.

The *Book of Mormon* describes America as “the land of promise”<sup>63</sup> for a Jewish remnant, who would traverse “across the great deep into the promised land”<sup>64</sup>:

And behold, this people [Jewish remnant = Nephites/Lamanites] will I establish in this land [America], unto the fulfilling of the covenant which I made with your father Jacob; and it shall be a New Jerusalem. And the powers of heaven shall be in the midst of this people; yea, even I [Jesus Christ] will be in the midst of you.<sup>65</sup>

America would also be home to “Gentiles” who “were white, and exceedingly fair and beautiful.”<sup>66</sup> Together, the Jews and Gentiles of America will work together to build the New Jerusalem: “And then shall they [Gentiles = Euro-Americans] shall assist my people [remnant of Jacob = Lamanites = Native Americans] that they may be gathered in, who are scattered upon all the face of the land, in unto the New Jerusalem.”<sup>67</sup>

By asserting Israelite origins for Native Americans, with Jesus Christ having appeared to them, the *Book of Mormon* has succeeded in establishing America as another Holy Land. As the saga of the Nephites and Lamanites, the *Book of Mormon* purports to be a faithful and inspired account of the history of Native Americans. They were thus among the first to be evangelized in the “Latter Day.” In October 1830, Joseph Smith sent Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, Peter Whitmer, and Ziba Peterson on the Church’s first mission to the Lamanites.<sup>68</sup> They preached to the Cattaraugus in western New York, to the Wyandots of western Ohio, and to the Delawares and Shawnees in eastern Kansas.<sup>69</sup> Proselyting among the American Indians would hasten the promised conversion of all Israel.<sup>70</sup>

## The Columbus Myth

Apart from a single verse, Christopher Columbus has no religious significance for Mormons. His inclusion here is because of the scriptural allusion. The *Book of Mormon*, Latter-day Saints generally believe, foretells the 1492 voyage of Christopher Columbus:

And I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles, who was separated from the seed of my brethren by the many waters; and I beheld the spirit of God, that it came down and wrought upon the man; and he went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land.<sup>71</sup>

The “promised land,” as the reader might expect, alludes to America. Columbus’s discovery of America, accordingly, fulfills Nephi’s prophecy.<sup>72</sup>

## The Constitution Myth

Generally, Latter-day Saints see the hand of Providence at work in the founding of America. An important feature of the Mormon theology of America is the conviction that the Constitution of the United States of America was divinely inspired. This derives, in part, from the following revelation given to the prophet Joseph Smith, in which Jesus Christ states: “And for this purpose have I established the Constitution of this land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose, and redeemed the land by the shedding of blood.”<sup>73</sup> That is not to say that God revealed the Constitution, but that there is a dimension of sacred purpose infused within it. One might characterize this influx of spiritual genius within the Constitution as the presence of an invisible, divine signature above the flourish of John Hancock. Jesus Christ, moreover, is believed to teach that constitutions, generally, are important for the good governance of a nation: “And that law of the land which is constitutional, supporting that principle of freedom in maintaining rights and privileges, belongs to all mankind, and is justifiable before me.”<sup>74</sup> The freedoms enshrined by that document—not the least of which is the freedom of religion—is seen as part of a divine preparation for America’s destiny as the bearer of the restored Gospel.

Without America, in fact, there would be no restored Gospel. According to LDS teachings, God has chosen America for a glorious destiny. While that destiny will not ultimately be forfeited, it can be frustrated. America’s destiny can and is being subverted by godlessness. Only by reforming its ways and by realigning its values and aspirations can America live up to its potential and fulfill its mission in the divine scheme.

## The Founding Fathers Myth

If there is something sacred about the U.S. Constitution, then might there be something divine about the Declaration of Independence as well? If so, then the hands that affixed their signatures to it—the Founding Fathers—were also fulfilling God’s purpose. During the Fourth of July celebration in 1854, in the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, Elder Orson Hyde (d. 1878) delivered a patriotic speech, as would befit the occasion. A few years earlier, Hyde had assumed the office of the president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles on December 27, 1847. Elder Hyde extolled the men who “had not only the moral courage to sign the Declaration of our nation’s Independence, but hearts of iron and nerves of steel to defend it by force of arms against the fearful odds arrayed against them.” They braved all danger for a noble cause, as they went on “to raise the standard of liberty, and unfurl its banner to the world as a warning to oppressors, as the star of hope to the oppressed.” Elder Hyde went on to say:

In those early and perilous times, our men were few, and our resources limited. Poverty was among the most potent enemies we had to encounter; yet our arms were successful; and it may not be amiss to ask here, by whose power victory so often perched on our banner? It was by the agency of that same angel of God that appeared unto Joseph Smith, and revealed to him the history of the early inhabitants of this country, whose mounds, bones, and remains of towns, cities, and fortifications speak from the dust in the ears of the living with the voice of undeniable truth. This same angel presides over the destinies of America, and feels a lively interest in all our doings. He was in the camp of Washington; and, by an invisible hand, led on our fathers to conquest and victory; and all this to open and prepare the way for the Church and kingdom of God to be established on the western hemisphere, for the redemption of Israel and the salvation of the world.

Simply put, America’s destiny and the Mormon mission are intertwined. There is an interesting—call it mystic—connection between the two. Wilford Woodruff (1807–1898) was the fourth LDS president, succeeding his predecessors, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and John Taylor. In 1877 (the year he assumed leadership of the Church as the senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles upon the death of President John Taylor), according to Woodruff’s own journal entry for April 1898, George Washington, John Wesley, Benjamin Franklin, and Christopher Columbus appeared to Woodruff in the Saint George Temple (in Saint George, Utah) and requested baptism for the dead (that is, for themselves), in recompense for their role in helping prepare the way for the restoration of the gospel.<sup>75</sup> “Every one of those men that signed the Declaration of Independence with General Washington called upon me as an apostle of

the Lord Jesus Christ in the temple at Saint George,” Woodruff recounts in the following spoken memoir:

I am going to bear my testimony to this assembly, if I never do it again in my life, that those men who laid the foundation of this American government . . . were the best spirits the God of heaven could find on the face of the earth. These were choice spirits, not wicked men. General Washington and all of the men that labored for the purpose were inspired of the Lord. . . . Every one of those men that signed the Declaration of Independence with General Washington called upon me as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ in the temple at St. George two consecutive nights and demanded at my hands that I should go forth and attend to the ordinances of the House of God for them. . . . Brother McAllister baptized me for all of those men, and then I told those brethren that it was their duty to go into the temple and labor until they had got endowments for all of them. They did it. Would these spirits have called on me, as an elder in Israel, to perform this work if they had not been noble spirits before God. They would not.<sup>76</sup>

This is clearly an instance of the “Mormonization” of America’s founding fathers. So religiously significant is this topic that Brigham Young University Press, in a commemorative volume, published a collection of essays exploring Mormon appreciation for the Constitution.<sup>77</sup> Space does not permit an analysis of other Mormon scriptures that are also interpreted as references to America.<sup>78</sup>

## The Theodemocracy Myth

Another Mormon myth of America regards the future government of America. On January 29, 1844, Joseph Smith and the Twelve Apostles decided that the prophet would run for president. This decision followed Smith’s unsuccessful mission to elicit assurances from the five presidential candidates, then running for U.S. president, that the constitutional rights of all citizens, particularly the Mormons—who were the recurring targets of persecution in a country that advocated, as a founding principle, freedom of religion—were experiencing. For instance, on October 27, 1838, Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs (1796–1860) had issued Missouri Executive Order 44, to expel or exterminate the Mormons from Missouri. This was in response to the 1838 Mormon War and a subsequent assassination attempt on the governor’s life (allegedly by Orin Porter Rockwell, a close associate of Joseph Smith). It was not until 137 years after being signed that Boggs’s extermination order was formally rescinded by Governor Christopher S. Bond on June 25, 1976.

Smith had asked each of the contenders—among who were John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Martin Van Buren—to offer “an immediate, specific, and candid reply to *What will be your rule of action relative to us as a people, should fortune favor your ascension to the chief magistracy?*”<sup>79</sup> Their position on this question was clearly unsatisfactory. Since none of the existing candidates would safeguard Mormon interests, Smith decided to run for president himself. It was during his campaign for president of the United States that Smith first coined the term “theodemocracy” on April 15, 1844. This neologism first appeared in a widely reprinted letter in a nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint periodical, *Times and Seasons* (published monthly or twice monthly) in Nauvoo, Illinois. America should (and, in the future, would) become a “theodemocracy”:

As the “*world is governed too much*” and as there is not a nation or dynasty, now occupying the earth, which acknowledges Almighty God as their law giver, and as “*crowns won by blood, by blood must be maintained,*” I go emphatically, virtuously, and humanely, for a THEODEMOCRACY, where God and the people hold the power to conduct the affairs of men in righteousness. And where liberty, free trade, and sailor’s rights, and the protection of life and property shall be maintained inviolate, for the benefit of ALL. To exalt mankind is nobly acting the part of a God; to degrade them, is meanly doing the drudgery of the devil. *Unitas, libertas, caritas esto perpetua.*<sup>80</sup>

What were some of the elements of this theodemocracy, which Joseph Smith envisioned? On the thorny issue of slavery, Smith advocated freeing the slaves and reimbursing their masters through revenues generated by the sale of public land. An ardent expansionist, Smith advocated the annexation of Texas, opposed British claims to Oregon, and, if undertaken peacefully, favored the annexation of both Canada and Mexico as well. On economic reform, Smith called for the reestablishment of a national bank, with branches in every state. To reduce parasitic bureaucracy, Smith urged that Congress be reduced to half its size, and each Congressman’s pay be reduced to two dollars a day, plus board: “That is more than a farmer gets, and he lives honestly.” The president of the United States, Smith argued, should be given the authority to suppress mobs and protect the constitutional rights of all citizens (including the rights of the Latter-day Saints themselves, who continued to face persecution). Smith urged that all convicts be freed, with the injunction to “go thy way and sin no more.”<sup>81</sup>

Instead of being elected president, Joseph Smith was assassinated on June 27, 1844, by an anti-Mormon mob, which stormed a jailhouse in Carthage, Illinois, in which Joseph Smith and his brother, Hyrum, were incarcerated, murdering both. As historian Kenneth Winn rightly observes, “The Mormons came to their millenarianism, in large part, through their

bleak republican assessment of the state of the nation.”<sup>82</sup> In the fullness of time, when the Church would fulfill its mission, theodemocracy would become possible. Not only that, it would become part and parcel of a world government.

## The America as Zion Myth

In the LDS creed known as the *Articles of Faith*, Article 10 explicitly claims that Zion will be built on North American soil: “We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion will be built upon this [the American] continent; that Christ will reign personally upon the earth; and that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory.”<sup>83</sup> What is this “Zion” and what is its connection with America?

Mormon sources say that the prophet Enoch built a magnificent city called Zion, a holy city, which was, together with Enoch himself, translated into heaven.<sup>84</sup> This city is idealized in *The Pearl of Great Price*: “And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them,”<sup>85</sup> thus providing an ideal type for Latter-day Saints. In the fullness of time, Enoch foresaw that his Zion would descend to unite with another Zion, to be established by a people drawn from the world over, which would be known as the “New Jerusalem.”<sup>86</sup> “Zion will extend, eventually, all over this earth,” prophesied Brigham Young. “There will be no nook or corner upon the earth but what will be Zion. It will all be Zion.”<sup>87</sup> Notwithstanding this later expansion of Zion, Joseph Smith himself made it clear: “The city of Zion spoken of by David, in the one hundred and second Psalm, will be built upon the land of America.”<sup>88</sup>

Latter-day Saints actually believe in two end-time “Zions”—one in Israel (Jerusalem) and the other in America (Independence, Missouri). This is based on a literal interpretation of such verses as Isaiah 24:23, who foresaw a day “when the Lord of hosts shall reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem, and before his ancients gloriously.” Rather than understanding this dual reference as a common biblical parallelism, Joseph Smith, according to a revelation, gave this interpretation: “Let them, therefore, who are among the Gentiles flee unto Zion. And let them who be of Judah flee unto Jerusalem, unto the mountains of the Lord’s house.”<sup>89</sup> There is thus a certain eschatological symmetry in Mormon texts between East and West, expressed as a complementarity. While Jerusalem would be the place for the regathering of the Jews, “Zion” in America would be for the gathering of Gentile and Native Americans (as descendants of New World Jews, the Lamanites).

In the New World, the New Zion is also the New Jerusalem. The *Book of Mormon*, which echoes King James diction, speaks of a New Jerusalem,<sup>90</sup> but

did not specify its location.<sup>91</sup> That information came with a later revelation. In 1831, Joseph Smith identified the town of Independence (now a suburb of Kansas City, Missouri, more than 900 miles west of Kirtland, Ohio) as the site of the new Zion:

This land, which is the land of Missouri, is the land which I have appointed and consecrated for the gathering of the saints. Wherefore, this is the land of promise, and the place for the city Zion. . . . Behold the place which is now called Independence is the center place; and a spot for the temple is lying westward, upon a lot which is not far from the courthouse. Wherefore, it is wisdom that the land should be purchased by the saints . . . that they may obtain it for an everlasting inheritance.<sup>92</sup>

Commenting on this pronouncement, which was a signal turning point in Mormon eschatology, Richard Bushman, a contemporary Mormon historian, writes:

The sacred history of the past at that point flowed into the Mormon present, soon after Joseph Smith received that vision. Oliver Cowdery trudged through the snow to Missouri to find the place for the holy city, the New Jerusalem, where Enoch and modern Mormons were to be united.<sup>93</sup>

Joseph Smith himself had drawn up his own plans for the eschatological city and its Temple complex. These plans are still extant. On August 3, 1831, Joseph Smith, together with his associates in the priesthood, personally dedicated the temple site.<sup>94</sup> The Mormon community in Independence grew to around 1,200 people.<sup>95</sup> But, within two years, the saints had excited the anger of their neighbors, and were driven out of Jackson County at gunpoint. The Mormons were forced to abandon Zion, which has yet to become the New Jerusalem. Today, the “temple lot” is owned by the Church of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), a Mormon splinter group.<sup>96</sup> When Christ returns to establish the Kingdom of God on Earth, the two capitals of the new empire will be “Jerusalem in the east and Zion in the west.”<sup>97</sup>

American Zion will be the scene of the return of “Enoch’s Zion.” “The City of Zion spoken of by David in Psalms 102,” Joseph Smith proclaimed, “will be built upon the Land of America.”<sup>98</sup> In the words of one scholar, Mormons added “to the disembodied outline of the millennial dream the firm contours of America.”<sup>99</sup> America was once Eden, is now Zion under construction, and will become the New Jerusalem (American Zion) completed in the fullness of time. Sacred history will go full circle, in that Mormon eschatology engages in “marrying millennium and primordium”<sup>100</sup> by envisioning an end-time return to Paradise, in which the earth would be “renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory.”<sup>101</sup>



## The Mark of Cain Myth

As in other religious myths of America, the issue of race typically comes up.<sup>102</sup> It is a pivotal theme in the American religious experience. Let us trace this development in Mormon history and doctrine.

While the Mormon message is universal in principle, in practice it was not, for the simple reason that Blacks were barred from the priesthood. The policy was first proclaimed publicly by Brigham Young in 1852. In 1852, and in spite of Joseph Smith's abolitionist leanings later in life, Brigham Young legalized slavery in Utah. For the record, it should be noted that, for years, Mormon scholars, most notably Lester Bush, argued that God had never ordained the priesthood ban in the first place, and that the so-called "Negro doctrine" lacks official sanction by revelation.<sup>103</sup> It would, however, take a direct revelation from God to eventually overturn Brigham Young's decree.<sup>104</sup>

What was the origin of this priesthood ban? Was it Brigham Young's own prejudice, or was there scriptural warrant for it? There are, in fact, several Mormon texts that might have served as a pretext for the priesthood ban, which was based on what may be termed the Mormon "curse of Cain myth," which is a further development of the Protestant "curse of Ham" myth.

In the *Book of Mormon*, dark skin was represented as a curse—the consequence of unrighteousness. In 1 Nephi 12:23, the Lamanites (a term that refers to Native Americans), because of their unbelief, "became a dark, and loathsome, and a filthy people, full of idleness and all manner of abominations." Unbelief and waywardness effected the curse. But why did the curse take the form of color? The reason is given in 2 Nephi 5:21, which relates: "And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, . . . wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them." Verse 23 makes the Lamanites even more undesirable: "And cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed; for they shall be cursed with the same cursing." The curse, however, may be reversed.

As 2 Nephi 30:6 promises, when these lost Jews, the Lamanites, believe in Christ, they shall become "a pure and delightsome people." In the original text of the *Book of Mormon*, the word "pure" had read "white." Under LDS President Spencer W. Kimball, the text was revised. "The *Book of Mormon* made the white race morally superior to the red," according to Brooke, "and the Book of Abraham subordinated blacks."<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, in the Book of Moses, black skin was associated with the progeny of Cain: "The seed of Cain were black."<sup>106</sup> This racialized reading of the curse of Cain equates divine disfavor with dark skin. Naturally, Cain's descendants were heirs to the curse, such that "a blackness came upon all the children of Canaan, that they were despised among all people."<sup>107</sup> Said to be under the "curse of Canaan," black males were thus barred from the Mormon priesthood.

It was the *Book of Abraham*, however, that “stood as the scriptural basis of Mormon racism”<sup>108</sup> by excluding blacks from the priesthood, beginning with Pharaoh (“Pharaoh being of that lineage”).<sup>109</sup> Pharaoh and the Egyptians, as descendants of Ham and Canaan, are represented in the Book of Abraham as the progenitors of people of African descent. The same Mormon scripture states that the heirs of the Canaanites and Noah’s son Ham “preserved the curse in the land” and that Noah “cursed him [Ham] as pertaining to the priesthood.”<sup>110</sup>

A dramatic reversal of the Mormon racial policy was proclaimed on September 30, 1978, at the 148th Semiannual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As the result of a personal revelation experienced on June 1, 2008—witnessed by high-ranking Church authorities and memorialized in his letter of June 8, 2008—President Spencer W. Kimball announced that “all worthy male members of the Church may be ordained to the priesthood without regard for race or color.”<sup>111</sup> Kimball’s decision, said to have been actuated by his desire to erect a temple in Sao Paulo, Brazil, assumed the status of revelation and was thus included in *Doctrine and Covenants*, immediately following the text of Wilford Woodruff’s anti-polygamy Manifesto of October 6, 1890 (canonized in *Doctrine and Covenants* in 1908). A witness to that signal event, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, described the Kimball revelation as “one which would reverse the whole direction of the Church, procedurally and administratively.”<sup>112</sup> Reflecting on its tremendous impact, the current LDS president, Gordon B. Hinckley, who assumed office in 1995 and serves as the Church’s living prophet, had this to say about the revelation: “I need not tell you of the electric effect that was felt both within the Church and without. There was much weeping, with tears of gratitude. . . . Gone is every element of discrimination.”<sup>113</sup>

Ever since the “priesthood revelation,” Mormons have actively proselyted Blacks. The symbolism of this sea change within the Mormon hierarchy was seen in the elevation of a Black, Brazilian believer, Helvecio Martins, who became the first Saint of African descent to become a General Authority. From 1990–1995, Martins served in the Second Quorum of the Seventy. According to some critics within the Church, however, the 1978 Declaration did not address the theological background that had given rise to the “older race theology” in the first place.<sup>114</sup> Notwithstanding, it is significant that current President Gordon Hinckley spoke on race relations before a regional conference of the NAACP in 1998.<sup>115</sup>

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has racialized religious beliefs about America by mythologizing Native Americans as transplanted Whites, but who have since darkened, and Blacks as once cursed, but now eligible for priesthood (males). Sacred Mormon scriptures idealize—that is, sacralize—America, as well as criticize, racialize, and ultimately deracialize it. In principle and in practice, Mormon myths of America have evolved as a direct result of a progressive unfoldment of Mormon self-understanding. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began

with the revelation of the *Book of Mormon* and its ancillary texts. Later revelations were needed to demythologize some of the racial aspects of these same Mormon myths. Like the Nation of Islam, the racial doctrines in the early history of the religion have softened over time, with increasing egalitarianism evolving Mormon doctrine as a reflection of America's overall social evolution into an increasingly diverse society with a corresponding ideology of multiculturalism.

In fine, LDS belief holds that America was once Eden, is now Zion under construction, and will become the New Jerusalem (American Zion) completed in the fullness of time. Sacred history will go full circle, in that LDS eschatology engages in "marrying millennium and primordium"<sup>116</sup> by envisioning an end-time return to Paradise, in which the earth would be "renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory."<sup>117</sup> Promising deification (perfectionism) through restoration of true Christianity (primitivism), Joseph Smith prepared his followers for the apocalypse (millenarianism), and revalorized America in the process. Viewing Mormonism three-dimensionally, as a complex of primitivism, millenarianism, and perfectionism, however, does not adequately account for its uniqueness.

For Latter-day Saints, there is the revelatory signature of Joseph Smith himself. In *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*, non-Mormon author Harold Bloom (who is widely regarded as America's foremost literary critic), credits the Mormon prophet in stating that Joseph "Smith was an authentic religious genius, unique in our national history."<sup>118</sup> Joseph Smith's "genius" is to be seen in his rejection of the received traditional interpretation of Genesis:

Smith's insight could have come only from a remarkably apt reading of the Bible, and there I would locate the secret of his religious genius. . . . So strong was this act of reading that it broke through all the orthodoxies—Protestant, Catholic, Judaic—and found its way back to elements that Smith rightly intuited had been censored out of the stories of the archaic Jewish religion.<sup>119</sup>

Of its myths of America, Mormon racial myths would prove to be the most controversial.<sup>120</sup> Yet the Mormon theology of America has undergone significant transformations with respect to its original doctrines of polygamy and priesthood. Gone is polygamy. Gone is the priesthood ban against Black males. Mormonism thus reflects the social evolution of America, in which professed racism has given way to professed egalitarianism. "It was a religious version of the American dream," as Ostling and Ostling have observed, "Everyman presented with unlimited potential."<sup>121</sup> Clearly, the LDS theology of America has contributed enormously to its evangelical success. The gold plates of Mormon (who edited and abridged the plates of Nephi)—nicknamed the "Gold Bible" by non-Mormons<sup>122</sup>—have thus gilded America. America, the beautiful, becomes America the beatified.

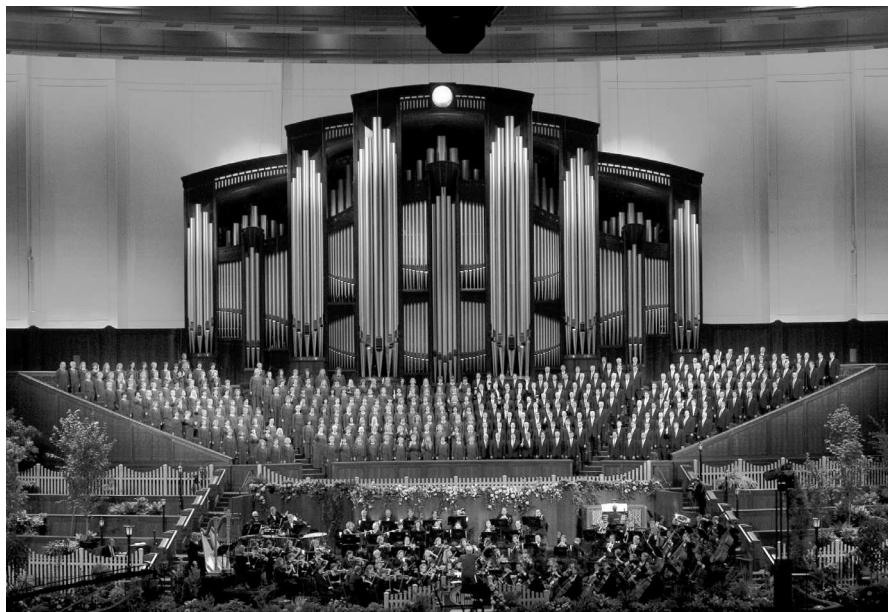


Figure 7.2. Called “America’s Choir” by President Ronald Reagan during his 1981 inauguration, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir is musically accompanied by the 110-member Orchestra at Temple Square, and by the majestic Schoenstein Organ (with 7667 pipes), at the 21,000-seat Conference Center of Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah.

A Grammy- and Emmy-award-winning ensemble, this 360-member, all-volunteer choir is sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The choir, completely self-funded, travels, performs and produces albums to support the organization.

(Photo taken July 18, 2004. Public domain.)

## Chapter 7 Update: From American Zion to World Zion

*We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built upon the American continent; that Christ will reign personally upon the earth; and, that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory.*

— Joseph Smith (1842)<sup>123</sup>

*I believe in my Mormon faith and I endeavor to live by it. My faith is the faith of my fathers . . . The founders proscribed the establishment of a state religion, but they did not countenance the elimination of religion from the public square. We are a nation “Under God” and in God, we do indeed trust. We should acknowledge the Creator as did the Founders—in ceremony and word.*

— Mitt Romney (2007)<sup>124</sup>

In 2012, a Mitt Romney ran for president. Overnight, Mormonism became mainstream.

Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney, former Massachusetts Governor, was defeated by President Barack Obama in the U.S. presidential election. Over the course of the campaign, the American public wanted to know more about Mormonism. Voters were interested in that information, whether or not it was relevant in making an informed choice. There was renewed scholarly interest as well.

In 2012, Philip L. Barlow, who is the Arrington Chair of Mormon History and Culture at Utah State University, published a journal article that can well serve as an update to this chapter. In “Chosen Land, Chosen People: Religious and American Exceptionalism among the Mormons,” author Philip Barlow noted that “a controlling premise and motif of the Book of Mormon” is that America is “populated by a chosen people for a singular destiny,” a place where “the United States Constitution” is popularly viewed by Mormons “as an inspired document.”<sup>125</sup>

That said, there are some subtle distinctions that need to be made. First, in the Mormon mind, “American exceptionalism” (“Chosen Land”) coexists with “religious exceptionalism” (“Chosen People”). As to proportional influence, religious exceptionalism would appear to predominate over American exceptionalism. This is because the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) is believed to be the restoration of the primitive church. Since original Christianity was presumably brought back to life in the 19th-century, when Joseph Smith founded the Church, many Latter-day Saints, accordingly, proclaim their faith to their brethren by the phrase, “I know the church is true.”<sup>126</sup>

So Mormons are a chosen people (“Latter Day Saints”) in a chosen land (America). In the Mormon conception of American exceptionalism, America, although a chosen land, can lose its special status (by becoming “unchosen”), thereby forfeiting its destiny by having failed to live up to it. In any case, being “chosen” is not a badge of superiority, but a test of mission. In other words, Americans are “selected for a role,” not for being “spiritually superior.”<sup>127</sup>

In his campaign speeches, Mitt Romney affirmed his abiding faith in American exceptionalism (with a hint of religious exceptionalism):

Tonight that American flag is still there on the moon. And I don't doubt for a second that Neil Armstrong's spirit is still with us: that unique blend of optimism, humility and the utter confidence that *when the world needs someone to do the really big stuff, you need an American.*

That's how I was brought up.<sup>128</sup>

A hint of religious exceptionalism can be inferred from the statement, “That's how I was brought up,” although interpretations may vary.

On November 12, 2014, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints drew the national media spotlight by publishing an article on its official

website, “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo.”<sup>129</sup> With the “contribution of scholars to the historical content presented in this article,” the LDS Church disclosed that “Joseph married many additional wives”—including Smith’s youngest wife, “Helen Mar Kimball,” who was only 14 years old at the time of the marriage (“several months before her 15th birthday”).<sup>130</sup> Tucked away in a footnote is a further disclosure: “Careful estimates put the number between 30 and 40.”<sup>131</sup> It’s too soon to tell what impact, if any, this revelation will have on the Mormon faithful.

Increasingly topical and newsworthy, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is distinctively American in origin and in eschatology, since America is the New Zion to which Christ is destined to return in the fulness of time. The Mormon emphasis on America as a chosen nation, however, appears to be diminishing, in large part due to the Church’s burgeoning demographics worldwide. Mormons now number 15,082,028 members worldwide, with 29,253 congregations and literature in 189 published languages.<sup>132</sup> Sociologically, Mormonism, whether or not properly considered “Christian,” can now be seen as a world religion, as Jan Shippo and other scholars have argued.<sup>133</sup> Theologically, the Christian character of the Mormon religion is zealously championed and defended, by the Mormon faithful, as pristine Christianity now restored, for all to see and experience.

## Notes

1. *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (D&C) 101:80.
2. Joseph Smith, letter to N. C. Saxton, Kirtland, Ohio (January 4, 1833). *History of the Church* 1:315. Mr. Saxton’s name is incorrectly given as “N. E. Seaton.”
3. Newsroom (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), “2013 Statistical Report for 2014 April General Conference.” See <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/2013-statistical-report-2014-april-general-conference>. (Accessed December 5, 2014.)
4. See “Top Ten LDS News Stories of 2007.” *Deseret News*.
5. See National Council of Churches, *The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* (2008).
6. Article 6, *The Articles of Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*.
7. Article 10, *The Articles of Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*.
8. D&C 76:58 (emphasis added).
9. D&C 88:107 (emphasis added).
10. Jan Shippo, “The Reality of the Restoration and the Restoration Ideal in the Mormon Tradition.” *The American Quest for the Primitive Church*. Ed. Richard T. Hughes (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 181–195; idem, “Difference and Otherness: Mormonism and the American Religious Mainstream.” *Minority Faiths and the American Protestant Mainstream*. Ed.

- Jonathan D. Sarna (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998): 81–109.
11. Grant Underwood. “Mormons and the Millennial World View.” *Mormon Identities in Transition*. Ed. Douglas J. Davies (London: Cassell, 1996): 135–142; idem, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois, 1993); idem, “Early Mormon Perceptions of Contemporary America: 1830–1846.” *Brigham Young University Studies* 26 (Summer 1986): 49–61.
  12. John L. Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 34–36.
  13. James Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith: Being a Consideration of the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, (1976), 204. Originally published in 1890.
  14. “Latter-day Saints.” *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*. Ed. Jonathan Z. Smith (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).
  15. Joseph Smith, Jr., *The Papers of Joseph Smith. Vol. 1, The Autobiographical and Historical Writings*. Ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 1: 6–7. Cited by Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 403.
  16. James B. Allen, “The Significance of Joseph Smith’s ‘First Vision’ in Mormon Thought.” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1.3 (Autumn 1966): 29–44 [29].
  17. *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, 652.
  18. Jan Shippo, *Mormonism: The Story of A New Religious Tradition* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 82–84.
  19. Talmage, *Study of the Articles of Faith*, 204.
  20. See D&C 132: 18–19.
  21. See D&C 13.
  22. See D&C 27.
  23. Talmage, *Study of the Articles of Faith*, 204.
  24. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1993), 374.
  25. Brooke, *Refiner’s Fire*, vii.
  26. *Ibid.*, xvi.
  27. D&C 130:22.
  28. “The King Follett Discourse.” See Stan Larson, “The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text.” *Brigham Young University Studies* 18.2 (Winter 1978): 193–208.
  29. Lorenzo Snow, *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow, Fifth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), 1.
  30. Brooke, *Refiner’s Fire*, 203.
  31. *Ibid.*, 199.
  32. D&C 132:17.
  33. See Numbers 27:21; I Samuel 23:10–12; Ezra 2:63.
  34. *Book of Mormon*, “Introduction.”

35. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1972), 70.
36. E. Douglas Clark, *The Grand Design: America from Columbus to Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1992). The present writer thanks the author for kindly sending a copy of his book.
37. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 139.
38. *Ibid.*, 140.
39. William Hosking Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1978), 238.
40. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young: Second President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Co., 1954 [1925]), 157.
41. Brooke, *Refiner's Fire*, 198–199; cf. 232.
42. *Journal of Discourses*, 10:235.
43. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 133, 134.
44. Brooke, *Refiner's Fire*, 198–199; cf. 232.
45. 2 Kings 17:6; 18:11
46. Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews: Or, the Tribes of Israel in America* (Poultney, VT: Smith and Shute, 1823).
47. Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois, 1993), 66–67.
48. D&C 133:26f.
49. Cf. Judges 15:9.
50. Ether 3:1.
51. 1 Nephi 18:23.
52. 3 Nephi 20:22.
53. Ether 6:6.
54. Ether 1:2.
55. Ether 13:4.
56. 1 Nephi 18:23.
57. 1 Nephi 12:23.
58. 3 Nephi 20:22.
59. Ether 13:4.
60. Talmage, *Study of the Articles of Faith*, 289–290.
61. *Ibid.*, 260.
62. Smith, *Essentials in Church History*, 53.
63. 1 Nephi 13:14.
64. Ether 7:27.
65. 3 Nephi 20:22.
66. 1 Nephi 13:15.
67. 3 Nephi 21:24.
68. D&C 32.
69. Smith, *Essentials in Church History*, 99.
70. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 136.
71. 1 Nephi 13:12. See Arnold K. Garr, *Christopher Columbus: A Latter-day Saint Perspective* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992).



72. See Louise G. Hanson, "Columbus, Christopher." *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 294–296.
73. D&C 101:80.
74. D&C 98: 5–6.
75. *Journal of Discourses*, 19:230. Qtd. in Clark, *The Grand Design: America from Columbus to Zion*, 129.
76. Wilford Woodruff, *Conference Report* (April 1898): 89–90. See Wilford Woodruff, *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*. Ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946), 160–161. This passage qtd. by Ezra Taft Benson, "God's Hand in Our Nation's History," fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on March 28, 1976.
77. Ray C. Williams, ed., "*By the Hands of Wise Men*": *Essays on the U.S. Constitution* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1979).
78. Some of the more notable of these include: 1 Nephi 2:20, 1 Nephi 13:15–19, 2 Nephi 1:6–7, 2 Nephi 10:10–14, Ether 2:9–10, 12, and Ether 13:3.
79. Kenneth H. Winn, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty: Mormons in America, 1830–1846*. Studies in Religion (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 198.
80. Joseph Smith, *Times and Seasons* 5.8 (April 15, 1844): 510.
81. Winn, *Exiles in a Land of Liberty*, 205.
82. *Ibid.*, 199.
83. Article 10, *The Articles of Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*.
84. Moses 7:19, 21. See also D&C 36:8, 42:36.
85. Moses 7:18.
86. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 186 (citing Moses 6:35, 38; 7).
87. *Journal of Discourses* 9:138. Cited by Clark, *The Grand Design: America from Columbus to Zion*, 215.
88. Joseph Smith, letter to N. C. Saxton, Kirtland, Ohio (January 4, 1833). *History of the Church* 1:315.
89. D&C 133:12–13. In Mormon apocalyptic premillennialism, Zion is to be a place of refuge before the great Tribulation, a seven-year period prior to Jesus' second Coming. In popular evangelical thought today, this concept of Zion is the functional equivalent of the Rapture.
90. Ether 13:4–8.
91. Underwood, *Millenarian World*, 31.
92. D&C 57:1–4.
93. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 186–187.
94. Talmage, *Study of the Articles of Faith*, 353; 515–16.
95. Thomas G. Alexander, *Things in Earth and Heaven: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 26 and 346, n. 13.
96. Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and the Promise* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), xviii.
97. Talmage, *Study of the Articles of Faith*, 346.
98. Joseph Smith, letter to N. C. Saxton, Kirtland, Ohio (January 4, 1833). *History of the Church* 1:315; Underwood, *Millenarian World*, 68.
99. W. H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1978), 238.

100. Underwood, *Millenarian World*, 39.
101. Full statement of "Articles of Faith," no. 10: "We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes; that Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built upon the American continent; that Christ will reign personally upon the earth; and, that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory." The original text reads as follows: "We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes. That Zion will be built upon this continent. That Christ will reign personally upon the earth, and that the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisaic glory." Joseph Smith, "Truth will Prevail" [popularly known as "The Wentworth Letter"], *Times and Seasons* 3.9 (Nauvoo, IL: March 1, 1842), 706–710. Republished as idem, Reprinted in Joseph Smith, "The Articles of Faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," *The Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 61.
102. Craig R. Prentiss, "'Loathsome unto Thy People': The Latter-day Saints and Racial Categorization." *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity: An Introduction*. Ed. Craig R. Prentiss (New York/London: New York University Press, 2003), 124–139.
103. Lester E. Bush, Jr., "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview." *Dialogue* 8 (Spring 1973): 11–68.
104. Newell G. Bringham, *Saints, Slaves and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People within Mormonism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981); Chester Lee Hawkins, "Selective Bibliography on African-Americans and Mormons, 1830–1990." *Dialogue* 25 (Winter 1992): 113–31.
105. Brooke, *Refiner's Fire*, 216.
106. Moses 7:8.
107. Moses 7:22.
108. Brooke, *Refiner's Fire*, 211.
109. Abraham 1:27. See also 3:1–28, 4:1–31.
110. Abraham 1:21–27.
111. D&C, Official Declaration 2. See E. Dale Le Baron, "Mormonism in Black Africa." *Mormon Identities in Transition*. Ed. Douglas Davies (London and New York: Cassell, 1996): 80–86 [83].
112. Le Baron, "Mormonism in Black Africa," 83.
113. *Ibid.*, 83.
114. Ostling and Ostling, *Mormon America*, 102–103.
115. *Ibid.*, 106.
116. Underwood, *Millenarian World*, 39.
117. *Pearl of Great Price* (1989 ed.), 61
118. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 82.
119. *Ibid.*, 84.
120. Norman Douglas, "The Sons of Lehi and the Seed of Cain: Racial Myths in Mormon Scripture and Their Relevance to the Pacific Islands." *Journal of Religious History* 8 (1974): 90–104.
121. Ostling and Ostling, *Mormon America*, xix.
122. Brooke, *Refiner's Fire*, 156.

123. Joseph Smith, "The Articles of Faith" (1842), Article 10. See <http://www.mormon.org/beliefs/articles-of-faith>. (Accessed December 5, 2014.)
124. Mitt Romney, "Faith in America," speech delivered Thursday, December 6, 2007, at the George Bush Presidential Library in College Station, Texas. See <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16969460> (transcript) and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hi3X8yPdLEE> (video). (Accessed December 5, 2014.)
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126. *Ibid.*, 52.
127. *Ibid.*, 55.
128. Mitt Romney, "Transcript: Mitt Romney's Acceptance Speech," National Public Radio (August 30, 2012). See <http://www.npr.org/2012/08/30/160357612/transcript-mitt-romneys-acceptance-speech>. (Accessed November 4, 2014.)
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130. *Ibid.*
131. *Ibid.* (Note 24).
132. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "Facts and Statistics." See <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-stats>. (Accessed October 19, 2014.)
133. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of A New Religious Tradition* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).



*Figure 8.1.* “Ku Klux Klan members supporting Barry Goldwater’s campaign for the presidential nomination at the Republican National Convention, San Francisco, California, as an African American man pushes signs back.” Photo by Warren K. Leffler, July 12, 1964.

(Public domain. Library of Congress. See <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003673964/>. Accessed January 12, 2015.)

## Chapter 8

# Christian Identity Myths and Visions of America

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*America will be delivered. God says: . . . “There is going to be a might[y] attack from the air. There will be great Hail Stones. There will be storms and strong winds will sweep the world.” . . . War is going to save America. Battling in the streets of the cities is going to say [save] your civilization from mongrelization and this battling is going to save you from being absorbed forever.*

— Dr. Wesley A. Swift (1966)<sup>1</sup>

Christian Identity calls for a White homeland and forebodes a “Racial Holy War.”

As an umbrella term, Christian Identity refers to a constellation of White supremacist groups unified by theology of hate. Christian Identity sects promote a gospel of racism in the name of Christ. Identity is not the only religion of racial hate. According to Betty A. Dobratz, Professor of Sociology at Iowa State University, three religious belief systems—Christian Identity, World Church of the Creator (WCOTC), and Odinism—have played key roles in the construction of White racial identity and in the maintenance of White privilege.<sup>2</sup> These White supremacist organizations have succeeded in harnessing the power of the Internet. As such, they are primarily a virtual community, with a larger-than-life Internet presence that might otherwise belie the marginality of this extremist population. Of the three, Christian Identity is the most influential.

The second most influential racist religion in America is the WCOTC (now known, since 2003, as the Creativity Movement), which boldly proclaims: “CREATIVITY is a *racial religion* whose prime goal is the survival, expansion and advancement of the White Race.”<sup>3</sup> Founder Ben Klassen’s *The White Man’s Bible* offers a “powerful Racial Religion.”<sup>4</sup> Odinism, the third major White supremacist religion, is a pagan belief in Norse mythology that serves as an alternative spiritual basis for White solidarity. Like the Creativity Movement, Odinism is anti-Christian. Of the three, Christian Identity sects

have the greatest presence on the Internet, as a 2001 study has found: “Of the religious oriented groups, Christian Identity appears to be the most common (73) with Creativity representing a small proportion of sites (7) and only one (1) designated as explicitly Odinist.”<sup>5</sup> White supremacy, in fact, has become a White cyberculture, with Christian Identity as its principal “religion.”

What distinguishes Christian Identity groups from politically oriented White supremacy groups is its success in using *religion*—that is, Christianity—to legitimize racist views. Identity theology provides a unifying ideology that effectively networks White supremacist groups. Christian Identity is really “skin identity,” since the color of one’s skin seems to be more critical than one’s religious identity. “Identity links biology and theology,” remarks Stephen Shaw, “One’s virtue is found in one’s skin color.”<sup>6</sup> Besides linking genes with creed, Christian Identity furnishes a cohesive ideology that serves to form a common bond among sundry White supremacist groups, as Dobratz and Shanks note: “Identity provides religious unity for various racist organizations and exposes people with such religious orientations to the racist aspects of the movement.”<sup>7</sup> In fine, Christian Identity has become the “religion” of choice for the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations and local branches of Aryan Nations, White Aryan Resistance, Southwest Aryan Separatists, and other White nationalist hate groups.

There are a number of enclaves within the Identity movement. They promulgate their literature both online and in print, as well as in the air. The “Church of True Israel,” for example, offers immediate access to the “sermons” of “Dr. Wesley A. Swift,” a major Identity ideologue.<sup>8</sup> In the print world, *The Jubilee*, a bimonthly Identity-affiliated newspaper published in Midpines, California, and edited by Paul Hall, is the nation’s leading White supremacist newspaper. *The Jubilee* sponsors a syndicated radio program entitled, *NewsLight*. All of these groups share a common belief system, with minor exceptions. Christian Identity websites function primarily as dissemination venues for racist literature.

Another Christian Identity group, “Kingdom Identity Ministries,”<sup>9</sup> operates out of Harrison, Arkansas. Of all the Christian Identity sects, Kingdom Identity presents itself most fully as a religion, replete with its own “Doctrinal Statement” that adduces its proof texts from various passages in the Bible.<sup>10</sup> Kingdom Identity is significant in that it is more focused and organized in promoting its “religious” views than the Church of Jesus Christ Christian/Aryan Nations. Kingdom Identity claims to promulgate its message by these means: “We proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom (government according to God’s Law) through books, tracts, tapes, videos, the American Institute of Theology Bible Correspondence Course, our international Herald of Truth Radio Broadcasts, a Prison Ministry, Biblical Counseling, Seminars, and other means.”<sup>11</sup> The “Herald of Truth” programs are short wave broadcasts emanating from three power stations—located in

Monticello, Maine, and Nashville and Manchester, Tennessee—as well as by satellite. Past broadcasts are archived on the internet.<sup>12</sup>

Briefly, the history of Christian Identity may be summed up as follows: In 1946, Wesley Swift (d. 1970) established the first Christian Identity church in Lancaster, California. Wesley's "church" was first called the "Anglo Saxon Christian Congregation," and then, soon after, the "Church of Jesus Christ Christian," reflecting his view that Jesus was not a Jew. Ten years later, in 1956, Swift ordained William Potter Gale, who systematized Swift's teachings into a coherent ideology when, in 1963, Gale published the booklet, *The Faith of Our Fathers*.<sup>13</sup> In his booklet, *Racial and National Identity: A Sermon*, Gale performs a racialized exegesis of Genesis, drawing this moral:

God's first commandment to Adam and Eve was for them NOT TO MON-  
GRELIZE THE HOLY SEED of God's family here on earth. This was the  
meaning of the command He gave them, not to partake of the fruit of the  
tree of KNOWLEDGE of good and evil, and this is exactly what He meant.  
The only tree with KNOWLEDGE is a family or racial tree.<sup>14</sup>

Here, the politics of identity have a scriptural foundation, as strained as the interpretation may be.

To somewhat oversimplify, Identity succession runs from Wesley Swift (1913–1970) through William Potter Gale (1917–1988) to Richard Butler (1938–2004). "Dr." Richard Girnt Butler was one of Swift's foremost followers. In 1979, Butler established the "Church of Jesus Christ Christian/Aryan Nations"<sup>15</sup> on a 20-acre compound on the shores of Hayden Lake, deep in the forests of Northern Idaho. Butler formed the Aryan Nations as the political wing of the Church of Jesus Christ Christian, as a secular, rather than a religious, organization. (The Aryan Nations now maintains a separate website that opens with the slogan, "Stop the hate—segregate!"<sup>16</sup>) In 2000, Butler was forced to relinquish the Aryan Nations compound after he was bankrupted by a \$6.3 million civil judgment in a lawsuit brought by the Southern Poverty Law Center on behalf of Victoria Keenan and her son.<sup>17</sup> After Butler's death, Christian Identity groups have further fragmented.

Shifting from history to ideology, Christian Identity is the polar opposite of racial universalism and egalitarianism. Not surprisingly, at the heart of Identity is the doctrine of White supremacy: i.e., the doctrine that the White race is descended from Adam, Jews are the spawn of Satan, and other non-White races are the progeny of pre-Adamic, subhuman "mud peoples," according to Identity theology. Christian Identity believes that Whites, not Jews, are God's chosen people:

WE BELIEVE the White, Anglo-Saxon, Germanic and kindred people to  
be God's true, literal Children of Israel. Only this race fulfills every detail

of Biblical Prophecy and World History concerning Israel and continues in these latter days to be heirs and possessors of the Covenants, Prophecies, Promises and Blessings YHVH God made to Israel. This chosen seedline making up the “Christian Nations” (Gen. 35:11; Isa. 62:2; Acts 11:26) of the earth stands far superior to all other peoples in their call as God’s servant race (Isa. 41:8, 44:21; Luke 1:54).<sup>18</sup>

Based on this information alone, Identity’s “religious” visions of America are clearly racial myths of America. These myths include the Lost Tribes Myth, the Two-Seed Myth, the Mud Races Myth, the White Homeland Myth, and the Racial Holy War Myth. Identity’s religious myths of America, therefore, have played a key role in “sanctioning racism and sanctifying it with an external religious authority.”<sup>19</sup>

## The Two-Seed Myth

To provide scriptural warrant for its beliefs, Christian Identity engages in a racialized interpretation of the Bible. This is particularly evident in the Two-Seed Myth and the Mud Races Myth. These complementary myths are remythologized exegeses of the biblical account of the origin of man and his races. Craig Prentiss rightly argues that “the Christian Identity movement . . . filter[s] their biblical exegesis through the prism of racial imaginations shaped by American culture.”<sup>20</sup> Through this prism, the colors of the racial spectrum are clearly delineated and differentiated. These myths, moreover, are two sides of the same ideological coin: both combine to show the inherent inferiority of non-White races.<sup>21</sup> To accomplish this, Christian Identity has formulated a doctrine of *polygenesis*, which means “many origins.” There are three tines to this ideological trident: (1) the White race is the offspring of Adam; (2) the Jewish “race” is the spawn of Satan; and (3) the other races are sprung from subhuman ancestors. Identity’s Two-Seed Myth, or “Serpent Seed” myth, simply put, makes Whites the Seed of Adam and Jews the “Seed of Satan,” because Eve mated with Satan in the Garden of Eden. One of the most visible Christian Identity websites, Kingdom Identity Ministries, formulates its version of the Two-Seed Theory in its “Kingdom Identity Ministries Doctrinal Statement of Beliefs,” as follows:

WE BELIEVE in an existing being known as the Devil or Satan and called the Serpent (Gen. 3:1; Rev. 12:9), who has a literal “seed” or posterity in the earth (Gen. 3:15) commonly called Jews today (Rev. 2:9; 3:9; Isa. 65:15). These children of Satan (John 8:44-47; Matt. 13:38; John 8:23) through Cain (I John 2:22, 4:3) who have throughout history always been a curse to true Israel, the Children of God, because of a natural enmity between the two



racess (Gen. 3:15), because they do the works of their father the Devil (John 8:38-44), and because they please not God, and are contrary to all men (I Thes. 2:14-15), though they often pose as ministers of righteousness (II Cor. 11:13-15). The ultimate end of this evil race whose hands bear the blood of our Savior (Matt. 27:25) and all the righteous slain upon the earth (Matt. 23:35), is Divine judgment (Matt. 13:38-42, 15:13; Zech. 14:21).<sup>22</sup>

As part of a subtler Identity rhetoric, note that this creedal statement does not explicitly state that the serpent, Satan, seduced Eve, thus spawning the Jews. But Genesis 3:15 is referenced. The text reads: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."<sup>23</sup> One can see how the two-seed line theory developed: there is Satan's "seed" and then there is Eve's "seed," which is really Adam's seed under a patriarchal reading. From Adam's seed the Whites descended, and from Satan's seed came the Jews, according to this perversely racialized reading of Genesis 3:15. How does this exegesis reach such an unexpected result? The answer is simple: It is Identity's racial lens that affords this idiosyncratic understanding of an otherwise universal religious text. Here is a prime example of this racialized exegesis: Wesley Swift, a former California Ku Klux Klan organizer and Methodist minister's son, offers this commentary on Genesis 3:15:

Rather, using only the Scriptures, I will show you that the Fall was brought on by an unholy sexual union between Satan and Eve. In Gen. 3:1, we read of a "serpent" appearing to Eve in the Garden of Eden. It's important to realize that the "serpent" spoken of here was not a literal snake, but rather Satan in human form. . . . Gen. 3:15 then tells us that two literal, biological seedlines are to come forth from Eve. They are the seedline of Satan and the seedline of the woman (through Adam). Verse 15 also tells us that the two seedlines would be in direct conflict with one another and in the end the Satantic seed will be crushed. . . . Finally, Eve was to have two literal seedlines come forth from her womb. One being the "serpents" (Satan in human form) and the other being hers through Adam. . . . But Jesus clearly traces the bloodline of the righteous only through the white Adamic race. In Matt. 23:33, Jesus calls the Jews "serpents." This is an obvious reference to their literal, biological father as spoken of in Gen. chapter three.<sup>24</sup>

While no less an authority than Michael Barkun (and those who cite him, like Cowan) holds the doctrine of Jews as the spawn of Satan to be a core Identity belief,<sup>25</sup> not all Christian Identity believers hold to this theory, but rather adhere to a "one-seed" theory, which is simply that Whites are the progeny of Adam. Thus, while Identity theology still maintains

that Jews are of another (non-White) seed line, the Two-Seed theory is not a universally held tenet. The alternative doctrine is that Jews are descended from Esau (Edom), and that they, along with Blacks and other races, are “strangers in the land” of America.<sup>26</sup> It is possible that softening of the two-seed theory into a one-seed doctrine is simply a case of what sociologists call “stigma transformation”<sup>27</sup> as a means of impression management or “deviance disavowal” to avoid the social stigma of being known as an anti-semite.

## The Mud Races Myth

In Identity belief, the White race is the “chosen” race, endowed with spirit, as well as body and soul. This “spirit” is what gives the White man his superior intellectual endowments, according to Identity doctrine, to wit: “Adamic man [the White race] is made trichotomous, that is, not only of body and soul, but having an implanted spirit (Gen. 2:7; I Thes. 5:23; Heb. 4:12) giving him a higher form of consciousness and distinguishing him from all the other races of the earth (Deut. 7:6, 10:15; Amos 3:2).”<sup>28</sup> This is obviously a narrow, racialized reading of scripture—an interpretational framing of race theory. It is an unapologetic attempt to legitimate White supremacy through reference to the Bible, as though it was deciphered cipher—a secret code that Christian Identity has now made clear.

By this logic, if the White race is superior, it follows that “race-mixing” is forbidden, as it dilutes and pollutes it: “Race-mixing is an abomination in the sight of Almighty God, a Satanic attempt meant to destroy the chosen seedline, and is strictly forbidden by His commandments.”<sup>29</sup> Note the abundant citations to scripture here, attempting to give biblical warrant to these racist doctrines. White supremacists, generally, have a great fear and loathing of what they call “mongrelizing” (i.e., reproducing interracially). Besides forbidding marriage and physical intercourse with non-Whites, social intercourse is discouraged as well. As one may see, the ultimate White separatism is the call for a White homeland.

It is one thing to foster racial pride. Yet fostering racial pride seems to go hand-in-hand with fomenting racial hate. It is a commonplace, on the Internet, to see consistent references to Christian Identity groups calling non-White (and non-Jewish) races as “mud peoples” or “mud races.” Obviously, “mud races” is a term of deprecation. Nothing more pejorative, and offensive, can scarcely be imagined. The term “mud peoples” evidently was coined by avowed atheist Ben Klassen, founder of the World Church of the Creator and author of two WCOTC scriptures, *Nature’s Eternal Religion* and *The White Man’s Bible*. The term then migrated to Identity enclaves, becoming part and parcel of the popular parlance of White supremacists generally.

## The Lost Tribes Myth

Christian Identity, and its theology-rooted racialism, has an ideological pedigree. A twentieth-century variation of British Israelism (also known as Anglo-Israelism), Identity holds that Whites are the true Jews because they are descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel. As British Israelism was an ideology for an empire, Christian Identity became an ideology for a race.

British-Israelism began with John Wilson (d. 1871), with his book, *Lectures on Our Israelitish Origin* (1840), in which he argued that the ten lost tribes of Israel, over time, had migrated through Europe into Great Britain. But the classic tract of British-Israelism is Edward Hine's *Identity of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel with the Anglo-Celto-Saxons*, which was a best seller in its day (having sold 250,000 copies!) and is still reprinted in Identity circles today. Beyond what Wilson had claimed, Hine (1825–1891) said that Britain, “the Island Nation,” was itself the true home of the lost tribes of Israel. For the British, this idea had tremendous appeal. In 1884, Hine sailed to the United States, where he spread his ideas over the fertile soil of ethnocentric American exceptionalism during the course of his four-year visit.<sup>30</sup> Stock pseudolinguist proofs are nearly universal in such tracts; for instance, when contracting the two words, “Isaac’s sons,” one comes up with the word, “Saxons.”<sup>31</sup> Wesley Swift adapted this doctrine to America, and naturally it spread to other Christian Identity sects. As a prime example of how this doctrine is formulated and given scriptural warrant, the Kingdom Identity “Doctrinal Statement of Beliefs” states, in part:

WE BELIEVE that the United States of America fulfills the prophesied (II Sam. 7:10; Isa. 11:12; Ezek. 36:24) place where Christians from all the tribes of Israel would be regathered. It is here in this blessed land (Deut. 15:6, 28:11, 33:13–17) that God made a small one a strong nation (Isa. 60:22), feeding His people with knowledge and understanding through Christian pastors (Jer. 3:14–15) who have carried the light of truth and blessings unto the nations of the earth (Isa. 49:6, 2:2–3; Gen. 12:3). North America is the wilderness (Hosea 2:14) to which God brought the dispersed seed of Israel, the land between two seas (Zech. 9:10), surveyed and divided by rivers (Isa. 18:1–2,7), where springs of water and streams break out and the desert blossoms as the rose (Isa. 35:1,6–7).<sup>32</sup>

In other words, America will be divinely established as a Christian republic. Note here how the Bible is invoked for everything Aryan. And so it is that Christian Identity is a species of the broader Anglo-Israelite Myth, which popularized the idea that the White race in America (rather than the British Isles) was descended from the lost tribes of ancient Israel. As one Christian Identity tract proclaims, America is the true Israel: “Israel’s new name America, the only founded Christian Nation,” is the “great Christian Kingdom.”<sup>33</sup>

## The White Homeland Myth

In the previous section, one sees how America has been accorded a special destiny. Identity theology provides a political eschatology that holds out the hope and promise of an Aryan homeland sometime in the future. That is to say, not only will America be the site of God's kingdom on earth, America is also destined to become a White homeland. Consistent with other aspects of his racist ideology, the idea of a White homeland was promulgated by Richard Butler. In brief, here is Richard Butler's story.

In 1968, the Lockheed Aircraft Company hired Richard Butler as a senior marketing engineer. His job was to help set up assembly lines to build the 1-1011 jumbo jet. During this time, Butler took flying lessons and got a private pilot's license. Then he began making trips to the Pacific Northwest. Captivated by the beauty and grandeur of that country, Butler dreamed of establishing an Aryan homeland there.<sup>34</sup> As the co-inventor of a rapid repair system for the tubeless tire, Butler was able to retire early in life, at age 55. It was then that he moved to Hayden Lake in 1974. There he purchased an old farmhouse on a 20-acre parcel of land, where he posted a sign warning, "Whites Only." The compound was patrolled by German shepherds. In 1977, Butler established the Church of Jesus Christ Christian, and then the political wing, the Aryan Nations, in 1979.<sup>35</sup> This foothold in the Pacific Northwest was the first step forward in realizing Christian Identity's dream of a White homeland.

Ordained a "Christian" minister after his correspondence course from the American Institute of Theology in Arkansas, "Pastor" Butler, from his Hayden Lake compound, openly advocated establishing a Whites-only "homeland" in the Pacific Northwest. Butler called his vision the "Ten Percent Solution." The Pacific Northwest would be a Whites-only, exclusively heterosexual enclave within the borders of five states—Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. Later, the Aryan Nations would call this plan the "Northwest Territorial Imperative" (or simply "Northwest Imperative"). If this vision was ever to be realized—and the Pacific Northwest become a White bastion—where would the non-Whites go?

The formation of a White homeland would require the expulsion, or "repatriation," of all non-Whites. In 1984, David Duke, who established the National Association for the Advancement of White People (NAAWP) in 1980 and later founded the National Association for European American Rights in January 2000, proposed specific regions of the United States where different races would be relocated. These proposals were originally published in the magazine, *Instauration*, and later reprinted in the December 1984 NAAWP News. Duke's proposal would redraw the map of the United States, roughly as follows:

Blacks could live in a New Africa made up of parts of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi; Jews would dwell in West Israel, comprised of Long Island and Manhattan; the rest of the New York metropolitan area and southern Connecticut would be home to various “unassimilable minorities,” including Puerto Ricans, southern Italians, Greeks, and immigrants from the southern Mediterranean littoral; Mexicans would get the Southwest, except for a slice of territory called Navahona, which would be reserved for American Indians; the Hawaiian Islands would be renamed East Mongolia and be set aside for Asians; Dade County, Florida would be the New Cuba. Anyone straying across their borders would be shot on sight.<sup>36</sup>

Currently, the most popular advocate of a White homeland or “Ethnostate” is Wilmot Robertson,<sup>37</sup> a “racially awake” activist fighting for a “territorial initiative.” The role of Christian Identity in all of this is to provide religious sanction for what are essentially political aspirations.

Richard Butler’s Hayden Lake compound was the crown jewel of the Aryan movement. It was the first concrete realization of the dream of a White homeland. On July 1, 1998, three of Butler’s security guards allegedly assaulted seasonal berry picker Victoria Keenan and her son Jason. Dees argued that Butler owed the Keenans damages for the terror they suffered.<sup>38</sup> A lawsuit brought by Morris Dees and the Southern Poverty Law Center in 2000 against the Aryan Nations resulted in a \$6.3 million civil judgment against him.<sup>39</sup> The case was captioned, *Keenan v. Aryan Nations*, No. CV-99-441 (Idaho 2000).<sup>40</sup> Enforcement of that judgment forced the sale of the Hayden Lake compound. The Keenans purchased the property at a U.S. Bankruptcy Court sale, and later resold it to a multimillionaire. The Aryan dream was shattered. But the Christian Identity myths of America live on.

## The Racial Holy War Myth

The Christian Identity vision of the *future* is a transparent revelation of what the world would be like *today*—if only Identity had the power to enforce its ideology. In other words, the time of the end is where Identity aspirations would be fully realized and come to full fruition. There are two sides to Identity’s vision of the end, as with apocalyptic scenarios in general, as Kathleen Stewart points out: “Apocalypticism and millennialism are the dark and light sides of a historical sensibility transfixed by the possibility of imminent catastrophe, cosmic redemption, spiritual transformation, and a new world order.”<sup>41</sup> In this double vision of the end of time, Christian Identity envisions a racial apocalypse followed by a millennium in which the White race, led by Christ, will rule the earth. In the Identity apocalypse, Christ will take revenge on the Jews, who will

be annihilated first: “The ultimate end of this evil race [the Jews] whose hands bear the blood of our Savior (Matt. 27:25) and all the righteous slain upon the earth (Matt. 23:35), is Divine judgment (Matt. 13:38-42, 15:13; Zech. 14:21).”<sup>42</sup> In a further elaboration on the American apocalypse, Identity further prophesies that Christ will return to bring judgment on the other non-White races as well:

WE BELIEVE the ultimate destiny of all history will be the establishment of the Kingdom of God upon this earth (Psalm 37:9, 11, 22; Isa. 11:9; Matt. 5:5, 6:10; Rev. 21:2-3) with Yahshua our Messiah (Jesus Christ) reigning as King of kings over the house of Jacob forever, of this kingdom and dominion there shall be no end (Luke 1:32-33; Dan. 2:44, 7:14; Zech. 14:9). When our Savior returns to restore righteous government on the earth, there will be a day of reckoning when the kingdoms of this world become His (Rev. 11:15; Isa. 9:6-7) and all evil shall be destroyed (Isa. 13:9; Mal. 4:3; Matt. 13:30, 41-42; II Thes. 2:8).<sup>43</sup>

Here, “all evil shall be destroyed” can easily be understood to mean the non-White races. In the Kingdom Identity statement, Christ will mete out punishment. However, the WCOTC/Creativity apocalyptic scenario involves what may be characterized as an eschatological vigilantism, in which Whites will wage a “Racial Holy War” against Jews and Blacks, not to mention other races.

The term “Racial Holy War” was coined by the WCOTC. The WCOTC coined the phrase “RaHoWa” as a battle cry for “Racial Holy War,” and it serves as an official greeting as well. The politics of digitality allows for this battle cry to echo on the Internet with impressive ubiquity. RaHoWa seeks the overthrow of ZOG (Zionist Occupation Government), which is part of the Christian Identity myth of a Zionist plot to destroy the White race through miscegenation.

The WCOTC/Creativity Movement has produced the *Little White Book*, which serves as a manifesto or bible. For the unsympathetic, this book is hard to stomach. Consider, for instance, how a massacre is heralded as a milestone in White history: “One hundred years ago, on December 29, 1890, at the battle of Wounded Knee Creek, South Dakota, the White Race finally and absolutely triumphed in America. Let us honor and celebrate this glorious day—THE DAY OF TRIUMPH OF WHITE AMERICA—every year.”<sup>44</sup> If the Battle of Wounded Knee is glorified as an exemplar in the White supremacist mind, one can well imagine what RaHoWa would look like, if it was ever to be waged. The *Little White Book* ends with these words, on page 33: “A RACIAL HOLY WAR under the victorious flag of the one and only, true and revolutionary White Racial Religion—CREATIVITY—is the ONLY SALVATION for the White Race.”<sup>45</sup>

Presumably, these are the words of WCOTC founder, Ben Klassen. While America is not mentioned here (presumably because RaHoWa would entail a global conflagration), this is, by far, potentially the most dangerous ideology we have encountered so far—the most virulent religious myth of America yet. (For many readers, the next chapter will prove equally disturbing.) Consider the case of Gabriel Carafa, a leader in the World Church of the Creator—now known as the Creativity Movement—and a skinhead group called “the Hated.” On May 5, 2006, Carafa pleaded guilty in federal court in Camden, New Jersey, to selling 11 stolen guns to an informant. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* account reports the following exchange between the judge and Mr. Carafa:

His body is covered in white-supremacist tattoos, including one on his forehead that reads “Rahowa,” which is short for “racial holy war.” The term is a battle cry for the Creativity Movement, whose leader, Matthew Hale, was sentenced last year to 40 years in prison for plotting to kill a Chicago federal judge.

U.S. District Judge Robert B. Kugler asked Carafa yesterday whether he was a member of the Hated. Carafa said he was.

“Is that what you have on your forehead?” Kugler asked.

“Yes, sir.”<sup>46</sup>

That a young man would tattoo his body in hate slogans vividly illustrates the extreme mentality of some White supremacists. And this hate ideology is exported as well. One fairly recent example of this is when the White Crusaders of the RaHoWa (a U.S.-based hate group) “set up a local website which lists a contact address as a suburban Adelaide post office box and an Australian business number.”<sup>47</sup> While the Creativity Movement presents itself as a religion, it is, as previously mentioned, atheist and anti-Christian. Some might say the same thing about “Christian Identity”—that, in practice, it is antithetical to Christianity as well.

What is the role of religion in White nationalist ideology? Specifically, what is the role of Christianity in Christian Identity? One of the scholars who has addressed this question was Professor Betty Dobratz. After a disciplined inquiry, Dobratz concludes that the answer itself remains elusive, inconclusive: “The extent of the centrality of ‘Identity’ beliefs to this movement needs to be further examined in order to understand the unity and dissent within the movement and the development of collective consciousness.”<sup>48</sup> The other two of the three major forms of religious belief among White supremacists—the Creativity Movement and Odinism—are openly critical of Christianity. White supremacists, to the extent that some of them profess a religious belief, will never agree on matters of religion. Religion is simply a means to a racist end.

Consider “Pastor” Bertrand L. Comparet. A graduate of Stanford University, Comparet was admitted to the California Bar in 1926, and so was a lawyer by profession. Christian Identity groups revere “Pastor” Comparet as a great biblical scholar. In his sermon, “Man and Beast,” Comparet uses biblical text as a pretext to justify White racialism: “Some races God classifies as *animals*. Their *nations are symbolized* as beasts in numerous prophecies.”<sup>49</sup> In the same vein, in his sermon, “The Children of the Beast,” Wesley Swift invokes a putative verse from the epistle of *Jude*, to wit: “I have separated and segregated you from all the people of the earth.”<sup>50</sup> There is no such verse in *Jude*. But even if there were, the interpretive modality is still the same: drawing an equivalence between the word “beasts” in scripture and “pre-Adamic races.” Many similar examples can be adduced. But the point remains the same.

Although the present writer cannot prove this, it seems that the animating vision of RaHoWa can be traced back to Wesley Swift himself, who, in 1966 wrote:

America will be delivered. God says: . . .”There is going to be a might[y] attack from the air. There will be great Hail Stones. There will be storms and strong winds will sweep the world. . . . War is going to save America. Battling in the streets of the cities is going to say [save] your civilization from mongrelization and this battling is going to save you from being absorbed forever. You say: . . . Oh, Dr. Swift, don’t talk that way, they may find a way to silence us. Well, one thing they cannot stop and that is “Thus saith the Lord.” With all the power they think they have in reserve, they can’t stop that.<sup>51</sup>

Here, in saying that “War is going to save America” and then directly connecting this “battling in the streets of the cities” with the goal of saving “civilization from mongrelization,” the elements of a racial holy war are present. This is no swords-into-plowshares vision of peace. It is an apocalyptic scenario with an idealized apartheid as its outcome. Therefore, it is not just the Creativity Movement that envisions a racial conflagration, but the great ideologue of Christian Identity itself, Wesley Swift.

It seems patent enough that the “missionary” outreach of Christian Identity is to recruit others for furthering a racial agenda. Identity therefore has only the trappings of Christianity. If mainstream Christianity’s mission, generally, is to save sinners, then one may ask if Identity adherents have the same goal in mind as the established churches. The answer appears to be no. It is clear that Christian Identity, as well as similar supremacist enclaves, uses its “Christian” identity for fundamentally un-Christian and unholy purposes—ethnoviolence in the name of Christ. This ethnoviolence, if seriously prosecuted, can only lead to blood in the streets of America cities, where everyone’s skin color will be tinged with the crimson of bloodshed.





Figure 8.2. Theodore Bilbo was a member of the Ku Klux Klan while serving as U.S. Senator (1935–1947) and Mississippi governor (1916–20, 1928–32). In January 1938, he stridently opposed an anti-lynching bill, warning of racial violence:

*“If you succeed in the passage of this bill, you will open the floodgates of hell in the South. Raping, mobbing, lynching, race riots, and crime will be increased a thousand-fold; and upon your garments and the garments of those who are responsible for the passage of the measure will be the blood of the raped and outraged daughters of Dixie, as well as the blood of the perpetrators of these crimes that the red-blooded Anglo-Saxon white Southern men will not tolerate.”* (Cong. Rec., 75, 3 Sess., 893, 873.)

(Public domain. Library of Congress. See <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/hec2009006011/>. Accessed January 12, 2015.)

## Chapter 8 Update: “Christian Identity”: Label or Libel?

*Note how Identity is demonized by use of the phrase “diabolical mixture.” Note the false claim that a church that believes the Identity message necessarily teaches that: (1) Anglo-Saxons are Jews, (2) Jews are the descendants of Satan, and (3) Blacks and other minorities are inferior “mud people.” . . . If this is the new definition of Identity, then I can truthfully state (as can most Christians) that I am not Identity and that I do not pastor an Identity church . . . Again, my sermons, radio broadcasts, and writings of the past fifteen years have been and are available to the public, and I defy anyone to show where I teach that Jews and people of color are subhuman and are children of Satan, or that there is to be an apocalyptic battle.*

— Pastor Peter J. Peters (2001)<sup>52</sup>

*“Identity” is a term coined to label the truth that has been widely rediscovered as a result of asking the question, “If they (the contemporary Jews) are not the Israelites of the Bible, then who are?” The true Israelites can be identified Biblically, historically and archaeologically as the Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Germanic, Scandinavian and Kindred people. . . . Initially, as a Christian minister, and did not accept this truth. In fact, I rejected it as nothing more than “British Israelism,” “Armstrongism,” or “Anglo-Israelism.” Eventually, however, I accepted it as true in about 1984.*

— Pastor Peter J. Peters (1997)<sup>53</sup>

On November 4, 2014, the *Handbook of Religion: A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teachings, and Practices* was released by Baker Academic, a Christian publisher. The present writer received an author’s copy on November 25.<sup>54</sup> The *Handbook of Religion* features 134 essays and 239 studies within the span of 812 pages. It was an ambitious project. While looking through the book, this writer noticed two essays on Christian Identity, by Michael Barkun, a leading authority, cited earlier in this chapter.<sup>55</sup> Barkun’s brief articles promised to be the best update now available on Christian Identity.<sup>56</sup>

To state the obvious, Christian Identity is both a racist and “political religion.”<sup>57</sup> An umbrella term, “Christian Identity” adumbrates a cluster of groups whose primary (and usually exclusive) domain is the world wide web. As to the size of Christian Identity, Barkun estimates its adherents number around 40,000, although it is not clear whether these demographics are current, or refer to the 1970s and early 1980s, when the movement was at the peak of its influence.<sup>58</sup> According to Barkun, Christian Identity is “the product of three independent but interconnected preachers: Bertrand Comparet, William Potter Gale, and—most importantly—Wesley Swift.”<sup>59</sup>

Barkun's articles offer a masterful yet succinct overview of Christian Identity movements, based on his years of research and prior publications. As one of the acknowledged authorities on this topic, Barkun's information is well worth reading. The following "Study Aid" provides a simple overview of Christian Identity doctrines:

	Study Aid #211
	Christian Identity Beliefs
<i>Israelism:</i>	White race descended from ten tribes
<i>Creation:</i>	Each race created separately (whites first)
<i>Flood:</i>	God's punishment for miscegenation
<i>Two-seed theory:</i>	Adam seed line: Abel, Seth, white race Eve/serpent seed line: Cain, Jewish race
<i>Millenarianism:</i>	Tribulation (race war) then victory <sup>60</sup>

Here, we see the familiar "Lost Tribes" myth, transferred from Britain to America. The otherwise sick "Two-Seed" theory is alive and well, excluding the "Jewish race" from the "white race," where race appears to be determined primarily by religion. Barkun then makes this interesting statement, suggesting that extremist elements in the otherwise radical Christian Identity movement actually reject Christianity in favor of "neopaganism":

As Christian Identity began to decline in the late 1980s, anti-government extremists on the far right began to gravitate to forms of neopaganism, such as Odinism, with its explicit rejection of Christianity in favor of a pre-Christian Nordic pantheon. Dan Gayman's Church of Israel in Schell City, Missouri, underwent a bitter split. Of the Identity organizations prominent in the faith's growth period, only Pete Peters's Scriptures for America, headquartered in LaPorte, Colorado, seems to have thrived.<sup>61</sup>

Taking Barkun's statement as a cue, the present writer decided to investigate "Scriptures for America" for the purposes of this chapter update.

Elsewhere, Barkun identifies several prominent "Christian Identity Websites": America's Promise Ministries; Kingdom Identity Ministries; God's Order Affirmed in Love (GOAL); Orange Street Congregational Church; Gospel Broadcasting Association; Posse Comitatus.<sup>62</sup> Apart from whether or not Posse Comitatus should have been included in this list,<sup>63</sup> what is significant here is that the Scriptures for America website is not included. Nevertheless, Barkun's inclusion of Scriptures for America ministry as among the "Identity organizations prominent in the faith's growth period"<sup>64</sup> and his statement indicating that Scriptures for America "seems to have thrived"<sup>65</sup> to this day is theoretically and hypothetically problematic, since it could be grounds for a possible defamation action, if this statement by founder, Pastor Peter J. Peters, were to be acted on today:

Christians, get this treatise into the hands of your local law enforcement agencies, and into the hands of your national and state representatives. If you wish, you can mail it anonymously. Also, we ask that you keep record of newspapers, law enforcement agencies, individuals, etc., who label Christian groups as “Identity.” To apply such a label is, today, slandering and libelous. Send your reports to Coalition of Christian Organizations, care of the LaPorte Church of Christ, Post Office Box 766, LaPorte, Colorado, 80535. Additionally, we ask for your recommendations concerning law firms which may be interested in filing libel and slander law suits concerning this matter.<sup>66</sup>

“Christian Identity”: label or libel? Pastor Peters seemed to think it was both. The above exhortation—asking Christians to report defamatory statements and to recommend law firms for possible libel actions—is part of a broader statement (a so-called “treatise”), titled, “We are NOT ‘Gay,’ We are NOT Cannibals, and We Certainly are NOT ‘Identity.’”<sup>67</sup> So labeling Scriptures for America as a Christian Identity movement arguably, from Pastor Peters’ perspective, may be construed as defamatory and could be grounds for libel. As said, this is purely theoretical and hypothetical, especially since a quick check of lexis.com reveals that no defamation actions have ever been filed by “Scriptures for America” or by “Peter John Peters.”<sup>68</sup>

As a general rule, an action for defamation may be brought by a plaintiff when libelous information is published to a third-party. But there is one sure defense to a defamation claim: truth. Truth acts as a complete defense.

“Scriptures for America” was founded in 1977 by Peter J. Peters, who died on July 7, 2011.<sup>69</sup> The reason why the Scriptures for America website today does not identify itself as a Christian Identity movement appears to be that over time Pastor Peters distanced himself from the organization. Apparently, Pastor Peters established his church, the LaPorte Church of Christ, in October, 1977. Yet it did not become a Christian Identity organization until 1984. Then, in or around the year 2000, Pastor Peters explicitly contested the claim that Scriptures for America was a Christian Identity organization. This was not a disavowal. Rather, it was a complete denial. However, the truth appears to be that Pastor Peters wanted to cover up the fact that Scriptures for America was formerly, and formally, identified with the Christian Identity movement.

The best evidence for this is that, in 1999, Pastor Peters actually changed his organization’s website to [www.christianidentity.org](http://www.christianidentity.org), and his email address to [pastor@christianidentity.org](mailto:pastor@christianidentity.org).<sup>70</sup> No more explicit identification with the Christian Identity organization could be evidenced or imagined than this. (This website was formerly [www.identity.org](http://www.identity.org), and Pastor Peters had a CompuServe email address.) Today, this website is defunct, with the message: “christianidentity.org expired on 09/02/2013 and is pending

renewal or deletion.”<sup>71</sup> The website has been “captured” (archived), at various times, by Internet Archive.<sup>72</sup> The following autobiographical statement can be found on one of these archived pages:

“Identity” is a term coined to label the truth that has been widely rediscovered as a result of asking the question, “If they (the contemporary Jews) are not the Israelites of the Bible, then who are?” The true Israelites can be identified Biblically, historically and archaeologically as the Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Germanic, Scandinavian and Kindred people. . . . Initially, as a Christian minister, and did not accept this truth. In fact, I rejected it as nothing more than “British Israelism,” “Armstrongism,” or “Anglo-Israelism.” Eventually, however, I accepted it as true in about 1984.<sup>73</sup>

Going back in time, one can that see Pastor Peter’s messages explicitly conveyed classic Christian Identity doctrines. Here’s one example:

There is no apparent sign of a spiritual revival in America and the Western World at this time. The masses of the Anglo-Saxon people have willed their soul to the devil. . . . The racial pride of previous generations is now being surrendered on the altar of racial miscegenation. There is no pride of race and of religion left in America among our Anglo-Saxon people. Our race prides itself in mixing its seed with the non-white aliens who swarm our land.<sup>74</sup>

Based on the foregoing, Michael Barkun’s claim may appear to be overstated: “Of the Identity organizations prominent in the faith’s growth period, only Pete Peters’s Scriptures for America, headquartered in LaPorte, Colorado, seems to have thrived.”<sup>75</sup> However, this is consistent with Barkun’s general observation that some Christian Identity movements have stopped using that label:

As the term “Christian Identity” has become associated with violence and anti-government activities, believers have ceased using it. They prefer a variety of other, non-pejorative terms, referring to themselves, for example, as “covenant people,” “kingdom people,” “kingdom covenant,” and so on. When asked whether they are Christian Identity, many deny it.<sup>76</sup>

What about Scriptures for America today? Even though it does not call itself a Christian Identity organization, what evidence is there, for or against, such an identification today? It’s hard to say. Here’s why:

There is a subtle hint of a “Whites-only” racial message from this self-professed “international outreach ministry of the LaPorte Church of Christ,” whose mission statement includes the following “This ministry is dedicated to proclaiming the true Gospel of Christ Jesus throughout the

earth, and to revealing to Americans and the Western Nations their true Biblical Identity.”<sup>77</sup> Clear evidence of the “Lost Tribes Myth” is seen in this greeting that opens every issue of “The Dragon Slayer Newsletter” published by Scriptures for America: “Greetings to the once lost but now found sheep of the House of Israel.”<sup>78</sup> Presumably this refers to White Americans as the true “House of Israel.” If true, this would make the “once lost but now found sheep of the House of Israel” the “Remnant” white sheep, i.e., White Americans.

A writer who identifies himself as “Ram Rod @ SFA” must be a son of late Pastor Peters: “I for one choose to believe what the Bible says, just like Dad did!” At the end of the article, the author identifies himself as “Pastor Peter John Peters’ (Dad’s) second, Jonathan RR.” Ram Rod then quotes a Scripture that contains the word “Jerusalem,” but spelled, “JerUSAlem.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, Jerusalem is a code word for the United States of America. A letter from a reader, from Washington state, asserts, in part: “I was listening to your sermon message via live radio stream (9/28/14 AM), and I was impressed by the power of your message . . . that the Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian, Celtic and kindred peoples are the actual descendants of the ‘lost’ or ‘dispersed’ tribes of Israel, and not modern Jewry.”<sup>80</sup>

The best key to unlock the underlying ideology of Scriptures for America is by the titles of the organization’s books, pamphlets and other materials that are available for sale online. There are a grand total of 1,176 audio recordings on CD that are currently available for sale online. The titles of these Scriptures for America sermons (presumably all preached by Pastor Peters) on CD are especially revealing: “The True Creation Story (Man, and then Adam)” (Sermon 102); “The Prophetic Curses in America” (Sermon 105); “The Teachings of Jesus and the Jews on Judaism” (Sermon 113); “What Difference Does the Israelite Identity Make?” (Sermon 114); “The Most Confusing Word in Scripture: Jew” (Sermon 120); “Interracial Marriage–Part 1” (Sermon 170); “Pastor Peters’ Encounter with Falwell” (Sermon 182); “America Found in the Bible” (Sermon 216).<sup>81</sup> These titles are suggestive of Christian Identity doctrines, but not conclusively so. They are available for purchase. The present writer has not purchased any. But this particular sermon would be the first of the present writer would choose to order, if pursuing this research any further:

#### 153 - Identity: What it Is & What it is Not

With so many diverse teachings and so many UNCHRISTIAN people being labeled as “Identity,” just what is it really all about? This message blows through the media fog of lies, distortions and exaggerations to discredit the Christian Israel Identity revival.<sup>82</sup>

Another problem with Scriptures for America is that, while it appears to have had a less pejorative outlook on non-White races compared with

radical Christian Identity movements, some of the literature that was not authored by Pastor Peters was, and still is, sold by his organization, Scriptures for America. The sale of the following audio cassette may be evidence that the Two-Seed Myth, while not actively promoted, was also not opposed: "368-Satanic Seedline by Charles Weisman. This message addresses what has become known as the 'Seedline Doctrine.' What happened in the Garden? Did Satan physically seduce Eve?"<sup>83</sup> The Mud Races Myth may be implied in one Scriptures for America book for sale: *Not of One Blood* by Charles A. Weisman which features, on its cover, a drawing of a handsome young white man, and drawings of three other men, captioned (clockwise): "Neanderthal," "Negro," and "Oriental."<sup>84</sup> This book has been promoted in *The Dragon Slayer Newsletter* in 2002 in the "Good Books for Your Library" section, and likely at other times as well.<sup>85</sup> Whether or not one or more of these materials explicitly mention, or strongly imply, the Two-Seed Myth, the Mud Races Myth, the White Homeland Myth, and the Racial Holy War Myth, requires further investigation. But there's every indication that the publications by Weisman provide undeniable evidence of such.

The White Homeland Myth is difficult to find in a search of the "Scriptures for America" website. This aspiration has also been connected with the apocalyptic myth of a Racial Holy War (RaHoWa), previously referred to earlier in this chapter. One important distinction between Christian Identity and evangelical Christianity (including the new Christian Right) is over the Rapture. Pastor Peters was asked whether or not he was a premillennialist and he replied:

Now, for years I have heard about this stuff called dispensationalism. For years, I have been asked the question, "Pastor Peters, are you a pre-millennialist or a postmillennialist?" For years, my reply has been, "Well, I am a pan-millennialist." . . . I did understand that the teaching of the rapture was not right. In fact, I have always threatened to bring a message entitled, "Pardon Me, Ma'am, Your Rapture Has a Rupture."<sup>86</sup>

America is the New Jerusalem, in Peters' view. "I see in scripture that there will be a new Jerusalem and it is not the old Jerusalem," Pastor Peters explains. "Here is described a J-e-r USA l-e-m. America is in the Bible and America will be redeemed from the hand of her enemies, which is Babylon. She will be delivered."<sup>87</sup> This is further evidence that Scriptures for America is a Christian white nationalist movement, but without the virulent and violent characteristics of radical Christian Identity extremists. As is obvious in the spelling of "JerUSAlem," it would appear that, since the United States of America is obviously meant by the capital letters, "USA," then it would stand to reason that the White homeland is America itself, meaning the entire country, rather than the Pacific Northwest, as in the "Butler Plan" or the so-called "Northwest Territorial Imperative."

Yet Christian Identity doctrines in Scriptures for America's ideology are not immediately obvious to the untrained eye, but may—or may not—be discernible, if catchphrase code words are detected and their encrypted messages are decoded. After fairly extensive searches, the present writer could not find much by way of overt denigration of non-White races on the part of Pastor Peters, although literature stating as much was marketed, if one sifts through the mass of materials with an eye for such. But perhaps this was simply careful management of the Scriptures for America image. Clearly, Pastor Peters was concerned about his reputation, and the reputation of his “worldwide” ministry.

However, in 2014, Scriptures for America clearly shows tendencies towards Identity doctrines. But one thing that can be said for the late Pastor Peters is that he is obviously a committed Christian in his own way, and that most of his sermons cover topics and concerns relevant to just about any Christian. In his own way, Pastor Peters is likable. He comes across as sincere, and apparently is a man of faith. On the surface, he may not appear to be as virulently racist as his Christian Identity counterparts, except for his anti-Semitism, which clearly comes through if one listens carefully enough to what is really being said, once the codewords are decoded.

To be fair, Pastor Peters was even criticized by his fellow White supremacists for associating with African Americans, from time to time, as he himself admits to having done in 1997:

My speaking engagement in Spokane, Washington, generated great news coverage . . . Homosexuals picketed the conference center, and one day as I walked out to go to lunch, I noticed a group of mostly black men standing in a circle with signs saying NAACP. They were praying, so I joined the circle and prayed with them. They prayed some very good prayers. Little did they suspect that the very man that the Jewish media had slandered and made them fearful of was in their very midst, praying with them!<sup>88</sup>

Is Scriptures for America a Christian Identity organization, or not? Has this zebra changed its stripes? Is this a horse of a different color? Scriptures for America is still blatantly anti-Semitic. It is still a white nationalist movement. Yet it seems to have undergone a transformation, over time, consistent with Barkun's observation of the general tendency of such organizations to disavow, and even deny, any connection with the Christian Identity movement. In the case of Scriptures for America, not only has there been a denial (but not a disavowal), but there is also some lingering indication that, along with the group of black men that he prayed with in 1997, Pastor Peters may himself, in the end, have “prayed some very good prayers.”

One of the last major Christian Identity figures, Pete Peters (d. 2011)—like Butler, Swift, Gale, Weisman and their ilk—is now gone, as are most of the



other second-generation Christian Identity leaders. Whether a new cadre of Christian Identity advocates will arise in their stead is hard to say. Now, Christian Identity appears to be on the wane, after it had waxed strong on the internet. Perhaps this is due to greater public intolerance of racial intolerance, which is increasingly disfavored. At best, Christian Identity advocates have been loosely organized, and have tended to operate as small businesses for the sale and distribution of racist propaganda. That business is dying. Christian Identity websites still exist, with online audio and video “broadcasts” geared to an ever-shrinking audience. At some point, people simply grow weary of hating.

## Notes

1. Dr. Wesley A. Swift, “The Coming Liberation of America” (January 30, 1966).
2. Betty A. Dobratz, “The Role of Religion in the Collective Identity of the White Racist Movement.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40.2 (June 2001): 287–302 [289].
3. “CREATIVITY: Creed and Program” (emphasis added).
4. Ben Klassen, *White Man’s Bible* (1992), 121.
5. Stanislav Vysotsky, “Understanding the Racist Right in the Twenty First Century: A Typology of Modern White Supremacist Organizations” (n.p.: Northeastern University, 2004), 9.
6. Stephen Shaw, “Harassment, Hate, and Human Rights in Idaho.” *Politics in the Postwar American West*. Ed. Richard Lowitt (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 94–105 [98].
7. Betty A. Dobratz and Stephanie L. Shanks, *The White Separatist Movement in the United States: White Power, White Pride!* (Boston: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 136.
8. Swift’s sermons are posted online by the “Church of True Israel.”
9. See “Kingdom Identity Ministries.”
10. See “Kingdom Identity Ministries Doctrinal Statement of Beliefs.”
11. “Kingdom Identity Ministries.”
12. See Kingdom Identity Ministries’s “Herald of Truth” archived broadcasts online at <http://www.kingdomidentity.com/radioarchives/>. (Accessed December 21, 2014.)
13. Rev. David Ostendorf, “Christian Identity: An American Heresy.” *Journal of Hate Studies* 1.1 (2001/2002): 23–55 [29].
14. Rev. William P. Gale, *Racial and National Identity: A Sermon*.
15. See official “Aryan Nations Church of Jesus Christ Christian” website.
16. See “Aryan Nations” website.
17. “Aryans Without a Nation.” *Intelligence Report* (Fall 2000).
18. “Kingdom Identity Ministries Doctrinal Statement of Beliefs.”
19. Douglas E. Cowan, “Theologizing Race: The Construction of ‘Christian Identity’.” *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity: An Introduction*. Ed. Craig Prentiss (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 112–123 [122].

20. Craig R. Prentiss, "Coloring Jesus: Racial Calculus and the Search for Identity in Twentieth-century America." *Nova Religio* 11.3 (February 2008): 64–82.
21. Abby Ferber, "Of Mongrels and Jews: The Deconstruction of Racialised Identities in White Supremacist Discourse." *Social Identities* 3 (1997): 193–208.
22. "Kingdom Identity Ministries Doctrinal Statement of Beliefs."
23. King James Version (KJV).
24. Swift, "What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden?"
25. Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), x–xi.
26. Dobratz, "The Role of Religion in the Collective Identity of the White Racist Movement," 3.
27. Mitch Berbrier, "Impression Management for the Thinking Racist: A Case Study of Intellectualization as Stigma Transformation in Contemporary White Supremacist Discourse." *Sociological Quarterly* 40.3 (1999): 411–433.
28. "Kingdom Identity Ministries Doctrinal Statement of Beliefs."
29. "Kingdom Identity Ministries Doctrinal Statement of Beliefs."
30. Ostendorf, "Christian Identity," 28.
31. *Ibid.*, 30.
32. "Kingdom Identity Ministries Doctrinal Statement of Beliefs."
33. Cited Ostendorf, "Christian Identity: An American Heresy," 31.
34. Southern Poverty Law Center, "Elder Statesman: A Life of Hate, and the Future in the Balance." *Intelligence Report* (Summer 1998): 2.
35. Southern Poverty Law Center, "Elder Statesman," 2.
36. James Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face: The Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, Nazi Skinheads, and the Rise of a New White Culture* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1999), 148.
37. Wilmot Robertson, *The Ethnostate: An Unblinking Prospectus for an Advanced Statecraft* (Cape Canaveral, FL: Howard Allen Enterprises, 1992).
38. *Time* 156.10 (September 4, 2000): 32–33.
39. "Aryans Without a Nation." *Intelligence Report* (Fall 2000).
40. See Michael F. Leavitt (student casenote), "Keenan v. Aryan Nations, No. CV-99-441 (Idaho 2000)." *Idaho Law Review* 37.3 (2001): 603–639.
41. Kathleen Stewart, "Bad Endings: American Apocalypsis." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28 (1999): 285–310 [286].
42. "Kingdom Identity Ministries Doctrinal Statement of Beliefs."
43. "Kingdom Identity Ministries Doctrinal Statement of Beliefs."
44. Creativity Movement, *Little White Book*.
45. *Ibid.*, 33.
46. Troy Graham, "Supremacist Pleads to Sale of Stolen Guns." *Philadelphia Inquirer* (May 5, 2006), 1.
47. "SA: Racist Group Bases Website Activity in SA." *AAP General News Wire* (Sydney: January 31, 2006), 1.
48. Dobratz, "The Role of Religion," 299.
49. "Pastor" Bertrand L. Comparet, "Man and Beast."
50. Wesley A. Swift, "The Children of the Beast."

51. Dr. Wesley A. Swift, "The Coming Liberation of America" (January 30, 1966).
52. Pastor Peter J. Peters, "Examples of How it is Accomplished." *Scriptures for America*. (Archived November 11, 2000.) See <https://web.archive.org/web/20001109191200/http://www.scripturesforamerica.org/html/examples.html>. (Accessed November 26, 2014.)
53. Pastor Peter J. Peters, "Framing Deceit," 3. (Archived on March 12, 2003). See <https://web.archive.org/web/20030312054940/http://www.scripturesforamerica.org/html/Framing%20Deceit.pdf>. (Accessed November 26, 2014.)
54. See Christopher Buck, "Baha'i: History, Beliefs, Practices," and "Baha'i: Theological Exchanges, Current Issues," *Handbook of Religion: A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teachings, and Practices*. Ed. Terry C. Muck, Harold A. Netland, Gerald R. McDermott (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 714–719 and 720–724.
55. Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); idem, "Racist Apocalypse: Millennialism on the Far Right." *American Studies* 31.2 (1990): 121–140.
56. Michael Barkun, "Christian Identity: History, Beliefs, Practices" and "Christian Identity: Theological Exchanges, Current Issues," *Handbook of Religion: A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teachings, and Practices*. Ed. Terry C. Muck, Harold A. Netland, Gerald R. McDermott (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 653–657 and 658–662.
57. Martin Durham, "Christian Identity and the Politics of Religion." *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 9.1 (March 2008): 79–91.
58. Barkun, "Christian Identity: Theological Exchanges, Current Issues," 659.
59. Barkun, "Christian Identity: History, Beliefs, Practices," 654.
60. Barkun, "Christian Identity: History, Beliefs, Practices," 656.
61. Barkun, "Christian Identity: History, Beliefs, Practices," 655.
62. Barkun, "Christian Identity: Theological Exchanges, Current Issues," 659.
63. Posse Comitatus is arguably not a religious organization, and therefore not a Christian Identity movement per se. In any case, its official website, <http://possecomitatus.us>, is defunct. (Verified on November 27, 2014.)
64. Barkun, "Christian Identity: History, Beliefs, Practices," 655.
65. Barkun, "Christian Identity: History, Beliefs, Practices," 655.
66. Pastor Peter J. Peters, "We are NOT 'Gay,' We are NOT Cannibals, and We Certainly are NOT 'Identity': 17. Warnings." *Scriptures for America*. See <https://web.archive.org/web/20001109023400/http://www.scripturesforamerica.org/html/warnings.html>. Archived November 9, 2000. (Accessed November 27, 2014.)
67. Pastor Peter J. Peters, "We are NOT 'Gay,' We are NOT Cannibals, and We Certainly are NOT 'Identity'." *Scriptures for America*. See <https://web.archive.org/web/20001206053200/http://www.scripturesforamerica.org/html/notidentity.html>. Archived November 9, 2000. (Accessed November 27, 2014.)
68. See e.g. *Peters v. Peters* (In re Estate of Peters), 29 P3d 90 (Wyo. 2001).
69. Bill Morlin, "Influential Christian Identity Pastor Dies," *Hatewatch* (Intelligence Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, July 15, 2011). See

- <http://www.splcenter.org/blog/2011/07/15/influential-christian-identity-pastor-dies/>. (Accessed November 25, 2014.)
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Figure 9.1. “A cafe near the tobacco market, Durham, North Carolina.” Photo by Jack Delano (May 1940).

The Jim Crow era was defined by legalized segregation, as shown in this picture. Under America’s apartheid, the “separate but equal” doctrine was the law of the land from 1896 to 1954, when the Supreme Court’s landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Jim Crow America set the stage for the rise of the Nation of Islam—a reactionary movement that promised to restore dignity and independence to oppressed African Americans across the country. However, the Nation of Islam’s answer to enforced segregation was, and still is, self-segregation.

(Public domain. Library of Congress. See <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/fsa1998006213/PP/>. Accessed January 12, 2015.)

## Chapter 9

# Black Muslim Myths and Visions of America

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*The Kingdom of God is an egalitarian kingdom structured on truth, where each of us will be treated with fairness and justice. America could become the basis for the Kingdom of God.*

—Louis Farrakhan (1993)<sup>1</sup>

*How is God going to destroy America? What instrument is He going to use? . . . The Honorable Elijah Muhammad told us of a giant Mother Plane that is made like the universe, spheres within spheres. White people call them unidentified flying objects (UFOs).*

—Louis Farrakhan (1996)<sup>2</sup>

*A black man with a white mother became a savior to us. . . . A black man with a white mother could turn out to be one who can lift America from her fall.*

— Louis Farrakhan (2008)<sup>3</sup>

**T**he Nation of Islam has an apocalyptic and chilling interpretation of Ezekiel, Chapter 1.

The Honorable Louis Farrakhan, current leader of the Nation of Islam, interprets Ezekiel, Chapter 1—considered by some to be the most mystical and recondite chapter in the Bible—as, as a grim forecast of the destruction of America. America is in mortal danger of destruction—not by nuclear bombs, by “drill bombs,” delivered from an arsenal in outer space.

Black Muslims believe that Ezekiel saw and described a giant spaceship, referred to as the “Mother Wheel” or the “Mother Plane.” To punish America for its evils of past slavery and present racism, the Mother Wheel will remove Blacks and then destroy White America.<sup>4</sup> A member of one of the branches of the Nation of Islam (the “Five Percent Nation of Islam”) is a

popular hip-hop artist, the rapper known as “Killah Priest” or simply as “Priest.” Priest was interviewed in 1997 with questions that probed his religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

At that time, Priest was a Black Muslim. In the course of the interview, Priest was asked: “Why, then, do you rap so much about outer space?” To which Priest answered: “Because that’s where we’re from! Black people come from space. When you look at the sky, it’s black.” Priest then talked about UFOs (unidentified flying objects): “I’m talking about pure facts. . . . But space travel is real. . . . Ezekiel saw UFOs back then—only they were IFOs, because he identified them. . . . They were chariots of fire.”

Alluding to the destruction of America that will be inflicted by the Mother Wheel, Priest invoked Isaiah and connected it with the destruction of America (although Priest does not explicitly mention America): “Isaiah 66:15—‘the Lord will come with fire, and his chariots like a whirlwind.’ He’s going to come and wreak vengeance.”<sup>6</sup> In one of his rap songs, “Madness,” Priest speaks of the apocalypse as foretold by the Nation of Islam:

I see prophecies unfold that was told by the prophets of old  
 Looked up, I saw the clouds in Heaven roll  
 Back like a gigantic scroll  
 UFO’s came down to damage the globe.<sup>7</sup>

This is a transparent reference to the “baby planes,” which are small spacecraft whose mission is to drop their payloads of “drill bombs” on White America in a literal Day of Judgment for the Babylon that America has become. This chapter will enlarge on some of the central Black Muslim myths and visions of America that Killah Priest has invoked.

Black nationalism is a reaction to White nationalism. For decades, the leading Black nationalist movement in contemporary America has been the Nation of Islam (NOI), whose followers are known as “Black Muslims.” Indeed they are Black, but are they Muslims? But that was not the point at all. There was a special reason for calling this religion “Islam”: since Christianity was perceived as the “White man’s religion,” Islam was presented as an alternative religion—the “Black man’s religion.” The Nation of Islam had therefore appropriated the name of “Islam” as this alternative religion. Yet the teachings of the NOI, at first, had very little to do with traditional Islam.

The Nation of Islam’s core teachings would appear, to ordinary Muslims at least, to have both congruities and incongruities with traditional Islam. For instance, while Whites may convert to Islam, they have never been allowed to convert to the Nation of Islam. As Malcolm X said in his 1962 speech, “Black Man’s History,” a Black Muslim, by definition, is black, and “the only ticket you need to get into Muhammad’s Mosque is to be black.”<sup>8</sup> This racial exclusion—this self-segregation is in an already-segregated



society—contributed enormously to the NOI's popular appeal among socially disenfranchised African Americans, who wanted liberation, since integration was not an option at that time.

During "America's apartheid" in the Jim Crow era, the Nation of Islam, adopting a prophetic voice with a shrill rhetoric to match, advocated a Black homeland, free of White oppression. Not surprisingly, the Nation preached (and still preaches) a Black gospel—a theology of Black liberation. Its prophets are "Master Fard Muhammad Allah" (God), Elijah Muhammad (the Messiah), and Louis Farrakhan (the Messiah's envoy), not to mention the stellar role played by Malcolm X. Today, despite its radical beginnings, the Nation of Islam's teachings have changed over time. Today, in fact, NOI doctrine and discourse may be described as moderate and somewhat egalitarian. This evolution is far more pronounced in the NOI's public rhetoric, but not so much in its private discourse. Nevertheless, the NOI has come a long way since Farrakhan's song, "A White Man's Heaven Is a Black Man's Hell."<sup>9</sup>

The "Lost-Found Nation of Islam" was founded by an itinerant peddler, Wallace D. Fard, also known as Fard Muhammad and, later on, as "Master W. Fard Muhammad." After being released from San Quentin Prison for having sold narcotics, he moved to Detroit in 1930. There, he peddled silk garments to Blacks, gained their confidence, and began to teach them their "lost" Afrocentric history. Fard was clearly influenced by the ideas of Noble Drew Ali (a.k.a. Timothy Drew), the Black founder of the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA), which introduced such Islam-esque precepts and praxis as the prohibition of pork, the use of Arabic personal names, and the emblematic display of the crescent-and-star motif. Drew, who was looked to by his followers as a prophet, foretold the apocalyptic annihilation of all Whites. Fard was, in fact, a member of the MSTA.

A figure shrouded in mystery, Fard either disappeared or died as of June 30, 1934. He was succeeded by Elijah Muhammad (originally, Elijah Poole, 1897–1975). The son of an ex-slave and Baptist preacher, Poole met W. D. Fard in 1931 at one of Fard's meetings on Hasting Street—the main thoroughfare in black Detroit—and believed he had found a savior for the Black race. Recounting that fateful encounter over 30 years later, Muhammad told *Ebony* magazine: "He [Fard] didn't have to tell me that he was Allah. I recognized him. And right there I told him that he was the one the world had been looking for to come [*sic*]." <sup>10</sup>

For a long time prior to this, Elijah himself had wanted to save his race. As a boy, Elijah witnessed a lynching. The victim had allegedly insulted a White woman. This was a horrible thing to witness firsthand, and young Elijah was deeply disturbed by it: "That event had impressed me so much that I cannot get over it; I did never [*sic*] forget it, not until this day."<sup>11</sup> As a youth, after listening to accounts of cruelty and suffering under slavery, Elijah used to say: "My grandmother, when I get to be a man, if the Lord

helps me I will try to get my people out of the grip of this White man because I believe that we will not be able to get along with peace under his government.”<sup>12</sup>

Elijah Muhammad went on to lead the Nation of Islam from 1934 to 1975. In addition to its theology of a Black God and gospel of Black liberation, the Nation of Islam promoted self-reliance by encouraging the large-scale development of Black-owned businesses. In its heyday, the NOI was a successful and wealthy enterprise. Unfortunately, Muhammad’s leadership was marred by moral contradictions in his own personal life. In January 1960, Elijah Muhammad’s first out-of-wedlock child was born—the first of 13 illegitimate children whom he fathered over a seven-year period by seven different mistresses.

During his tenure as leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad attracted two converts who would become his most famous protégés: Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan. While in prison, Malcolm X converted to the Nation of Islam in late 1948, and he went on to have a colorful and controversial career. From his parole from prison in 1952 until his break with the Nation in 1964, Malcolm X helped the ranks of the Nation swell from an estimated 500 members in 1952 to 30,000 strong in 1963.

One of the lesser-known incidents in his life involved negotiations with the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). In December 1960, Elijah Muhammad ordered Malcolm X to meet representatives of the KKK in Atlanta, to investigate their offer to Muhammad of a tract of land “so that his program of separation would sound more feasible to Negroes and therefore lessen the pressure that the integrationists were putting upon the white man.”<sup>13</sup> Later, when he found out about Elijah Muhammad’s sexual escapades, Malcolm X began to have serious doubts, not only about Muhammad’s integrity in the wake of such moral turpitude, but about whether Muhammad was really a messenger of Allah, as he had claimed.

On March 12, 1964, Malcolm X announced that he was leaving the Nation of Islam. He went on to found the Muslim Mosque, Inc. and later, on June 28, 1964, the Organization of Afro-American Unity. On April 19, 1964, Malcolm X completed his pilgrimage (*Hajj*) to Mecca and became El-Hajj Malik al-Shabazz, his new Muslim name. On February 21, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated on the stage of the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem (with a strong suspicion that the NOI’s paramilitary wing, the Fruit of Islam, was behind the assassination), thus ending a prophetic career as a social reformer.

Meanwhile, in 1955, Louis Eugene Wolcott, a former nightclub singer, joined the Nation of Islam. He was recruited by both Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. Wolcott first became known as Minister Louis X, and later as Abdul Haleem Farrakhan, and, now, the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan. When Elijah Muhammad died on February 25, 1975, many thought that Farrakhan would succeed him. But Elijah Muhammad

had appointed his youngest son, Wallace Muhammad, as his successor instead. During his first three years as leader of the Nation of Islam, Wallace Muhammad (1933–2008), also known as Warith Deen Mohammed, gradually renounced the teachings of his late father and converted a great number of former members of the Nation into traditional Muslims. Having led the Nation of Islam into mainstream Islam, Wallace Muhammad changed the Nation's name to the "American Muslim Mission." In 1977, Farrakhan left the American Muslim Mission, and, having taken several thousand followers with him, reestablished the Nation of Islam under the name, the "Original Nation of Islam."

The Nation of Islam's rise to power and influence reached its peak in October 1995. The Million Man March, conceived and organized under NOI leader Louis Farrakhan, was the largest gathering of African Americans in U.S. history. The Million Man March was the crowning testimony to the power and influence of Louis Farrakhan as a Black leader and power broker. Yet, fairly recently, in fact, the Nation of Islam has come to embrace traditional Islam. Like the conversion of Malcolm X—from the Nation of Islam to traditional Islam—the NOI, in several major ways, has undergone a slow conversion to traditional Islam. Farrakhan finally led a transition of the NOI back to traditional Islam—culminating in his open espousal of classical Islam—when he ostensibly reconciled with Warith Deen Mohammed on "Saviour's Day" in February 1999. Yet, today, the Nation of Islam still maintains a distinct Black national identity, and has never disclaimed its Black nationalist myths, which are the subject of this chapter. The major religious myths of the Nation of Islam are the Yacub Myth, the Mother Wheel Myth, and the Destruction of America Myth, which is where jeremiad and apocalyptic rhetoric ultimately intermix.

## **The Yacub Myth**

Although this myth sprung from the fertile imagination of Elijah Muhammad, it was Malcolm X who gave definitive expression to this myth in short form, as Terrill observes generally about Malcolm X's repackaging of Elijah Muhammad's teachings: "While a minister in the Nation of Islam, Malcolm crafted from the rambling revelations of Elijah Muhammad a hermetically sealed prophetic rhetoric—it called upon its audience to realign their values and behaviors with a foundational set of truths presented in and through that very discourse."<sup>14</sup> Just before Christmas in December 1962, Malcolm X delivered his vociferously anti-White sermon, "Black Man's History,"<sup>15</sup> at the Harlem's Nation of Islam's Mosque No. 7 in Harlem. On Malcolm's instructions, this speech was recorded by "Benjamin 2X" (now Benjamin Karim), one of Malcolm's most trusted and faithful lieutenants.

In “Black Man’s History,” Malcolm X restates Elijah Muhammad’s esoteric teachings about the origin of races, beginning with the proposition: “The birth of the white race has always been a secret.”<sup>16</sup> According to Malcolm X, Blacks came into existence 66 trillion years ago:

The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that sixty-six trillion years ago our people were living on this planet: the black man was living on this planet. But in those days it was larger than it is now, and the planet Mars, that was off here beyond it, had an effect upon our planet then in the same manner that the moon affects us today.<sup>17</sup>

They were an advanced race. For eons, Blacks led a blissful existence. But their paradise suddenly ended 6,000 years ago when an evil Black scientist, Yacub (a.k.a. “Yakub”), was bent on creating the White race. When he succeeded, the White race, evil by nature, would rule over Blacks for 6,000 years.

Malcolm goes on to retell the fantastic tale of the origins of the White race, at the hands of evil Black scientist Yacub. Born in the year 8,400, Yacub discovered the law of magnetism at the age of six. As polar opposites attract, magnetism inspired Yacub to create a race that was the polar opposite of Blacks. By so doing, he would create a human magnetic force field. Yacub later discovered the secrets of genetics. This enabled Yacub to act on his wish to create a new race. When the book of Genesis says, “Let us make man,” these were Yacub’s words, not God’s. Yacub accomplished this by means of a nefarious birth control law designed to favor light-skinned offspring over black-skinned infants. Yacub forbade Black couples to marry. But if one partner was brown in color, they could. If they gave birth to a black child, doctors were to “put a needle in its brain and feed it to a wild animal or give it to the cremator.”<sup>18</sup> Within 200 years, no more Black babies were born.

After Yacub’s death at age 150, this process of favoring lighter-skinned offspring continued. Thus the brown race emerged from the black, the yellow race from the brown, and the white race from the yellow. After 200 years, the brown race was destroyed, leaving only “a yellow or mulatto-looking civilization.”<sup>19</sup> After a full 600 years had elapsed, “they had grafted away the black, grafted away the brown, grafted away the yellow, so that all they had left was a pale-skinned, blue-eyed, blonde-haired thing that you call a man.”<sup>20</sup> But this was no man: “actually the Bible calls him the devil, . . . old Lucifer, Satan, or the serpent.”<sup>21</sup>

Malcolm X concludes this segment of his speech in saying: “They had to murder off the black, brown, and yellow in order to get to the white. And right to this very day the white man by nature wants to murder off the black, brown, and yellow.”<sup>22</sup> And further: “You’re not using the right language when you say the white man. You call it the devil.”<sup>23</sup> A further

instance of the anti-White invectives of this remarkable (and equally disturbing) speech is the teaching that Whites cannot walk truly upright, since they evolved from cavemen who crawled on all fours.<sup>24</sup> Malcolm X goes on to deepen anti-White antipathy by exciting feelings of repulsion for the moral depravity of the White race. Here, Malcolm X suggests that White women mated with dogs:

Oh yes, this was the white man, brother, up in the caves of Europe. He had a tail that long . . . The Honorable Elijah Muhammad says . . . what the white man would do, he'd dig a hole in the hill, that was his cave. And his mother and his daughter and his wife would all be in there with the dog. The only thing that made friends with the white man was the dog. . . . It was then that the dog and the white man amalgamated. The white woman went with the dog while they were living in the caves of Europe. And right to this very day the white woman will tell you there is nothing she loves better than a dog. They tell you that a dog is a man's best friend. They lived in that cave with those dogs and right now they got that dog smell.<sup>25</sup>

Yacub would then teach this man "tricknology"<sup>26</sup>—the science of deceit. And so the White man is the devil. The White race is not only racist, but inherently murderous. The Nation of Islam has not repudiated these beliefs. No efforts are made to distance the Nation of Islam from this core mythology. Unabashed and unapologetic, this counter-racist mythology, equally bigoted, has taken on a life of its own, in foreseeable perpetuity.

## **The Mother Wheel Myth**

The Nation of Islam developed an apocalyptic scenario that promised racialized retribution. To vanquish evil, the world must be freed of the White Devil. The White race will be obliterated, as Elijah Muhammad has stated: "According to the history of the white race (devils) they are guilty of . . . causing war among the people and themselves ever since they have been on our planet Earth. So the God of the righteous . . . has decided to remove them from the face of the Earth."<sup>27</sup> Under this vision of the end, God would judge between the "White Devil" and the Black man. Justice would then prevail, not as equalization, but in annihilation of the White man. Armageddon is thus to be a racial war<sup>28</sup>—an eschatology of reverse racism, if you will. (One may think about the NOI apocalypse as a functional counterpart to the "Racial Holy War" predicted by the Creativity Movement, as discussed in the previous chapter.)

How would all this take place? In one sense, the countdown to Armageddon began when the slave ship, "Jesus of Lubeck," captained by the

white devil, John Hawkins, came upon the shores of West Africa. “In effect, slavery brought the original people like a Trojan horse into the fortress of evil,” Mattias Gardell observes, “giving the African American a key role in the approaching apocalypse.”<sup>29</sup> Armageddon will be preceded by a kind of Black “rapture.” Like faithful Christians being swept up into the air before Jesus comes on a mushroom cloud, Black Muslims will be transported by spacecraft to the Mother Wheel, their safe haven for the duration of the apocalyptic upheaval.<sup>30</sup> The White race, however, will be exterminated under a hail of bombs dropped by space warplanes that are sent out on missions of destruction by the Mother Plane.<sup>31</sup>

The “Mother Wheel” myth is based on Ezekiel’s wheel of fire, originally derived from Elijah Muhammad’s allegorization of passages from Ezekiel 10:2–11.<sup>32</sup> This is clear in Chapter 125 of *Message to the Blackman*, “Battle in the Sky Is Near.” But the most extensive description is by Elijah Muhammad, in Chapter 58, “The Mother Plane,” in his book, *The Fall of America*, available online, an excerpt of which will serve to illustrate this flight of imagination:

The Mother Plane was made to destroy this world of evil and to show the wisdom and mighty power of the God Whom came to destroy an old world and set up a new world. . . . The same type of plane was used by the Original God to put mountains on His planets. . . . Allah (God) Who came in the Person of Master Fard Muhammad, . . . taught me that . . . He will raise these mountains to a height of one (1) mile over the United States of America.<sup>33</sup>

Elijah Muhammad says that the Mother Plane was taught by W. D. Fard himself. Be that as it may, this teaching is said to be grounded in Ezekiel’s vision. This is Elijah Muhammad’s exegesis of it, in brief:

Ezekiel saw the Mother Plane in a vision. . . . According to the Bible, he looked up and saw this Plane (Ez. 1:16) and he called it a wheel because it was made like a wheel. A Plane that is wheel-shaped can turn in any direction, at any time. He admitted that the Plane was so high that it looked dreadful, and he cried out, “O wheel” (Ez. 10:13). Ezekiel saw great work going on in the wheel and four living creatures “and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel.” (Ez. 1:16). And when the living creatures went, the wheels went with them: and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels, were lifted up (Ez. 1:19).

In Ezekiel’s vision concerning the wheel, he said that he heard the voice of one tell the other to take coals of fire and to scatter it over the cities; this means bombs. . . . Allah (God) taught me that these bombs are not to be dropped into water. They are to be dropped only on the

cities. . . . Allah (God) Whom came in the Person of Master Fard Muhammad, to Whom praises are due forever, taught me that the Mother plane is a little human-made planet.<sup>34</sup>

Elijah Muhammad goes on to explain that the “four creatures represents the four colors of the original people of the earth”—that is, “the four colors of the Black man (Black, Brown, Yellow and Red).”<sup>35</sup> Excluded here is the evil White race, which will be destroyed. This fate of the White race is not, however, absolute. Claude Andrew Clegg makes this important observation: “As one of the few major changes that Elijah Muhammad introduced into the Nation’s overall belief system, over time white Muslims became eligible for salvation; however, their hereafter would supposedly be qualitatively inferior to that of blacks.”<sup>36</sup> A “remnant” of the White race would be saved. This is hardly reassuring for Whites, as Clegg observes: “For the most part, the question of white redemption was academic insofar as so few would be able to contradict their wicked nature and save America by extending freedom, justice, and equality to the so-called Negro.”<sup>37</sup> Those few Whites who would be saved, however, will only be converts to Islam.

The divine judgment executed by the Mother Wheel would pave the way for the promised golden age, a utopian vision that Black Muslims would dream of. This is the Millennium, which will be a Black paradise. The Black Nation will be raised upon the smouldering ashes of the vanquished Caucasian civilization. The remnant of humanity will number a little more than the 144,000 spoken of in the Book of Revelation. All vestiges of the old world will have been obliterated. In a mere 20 years’ time, the very memory of American civilization will vanish from the minds of the saved. The new government will be “based upon truth, freedom, justice, and equality.”<sup>38</sup> The Original People will be biologically enhanced, physically fitter. They will be “clothed in silk interwoven with gold.”<sup>39</sup> Appearing as youthful 16-year-olds, Black people will have a life-span of a thousand years or longer.<sup>40</sup>

## **The Destruction of America Myth**

A further development of the Mother Wheel Myth is the Destruction of America Myth. Again, this is the product of Elijah Muhammad’s imaginative end-time scenario. However, the way in which Malcolm X relates it may be of more interest to readers. On December 4, 1963, Malcolm X would deliver his speech, “God’s Judgment of America”<sup>41</sup>—later changed to “God’s Judgment of White America.” This was popularly known as “The Chickens Come Home to Roost” speech. The reason is this: shortly after making this speech, Malcolm was asked by the press for his opinion on the recent assassination of President John F. Kennedy. In response, Malcolm caustically remarked that Kennedy “never foresaw that the chickens would

come home to roost so soon.” This callous quip set off a firestorm, leading Elijah Muhammad to impose 90 days of silence on his leading spokesman. Remarkably, “God’s Judgment of White America” incorporates hardly any of the elements of Elijah Muhammad’s apocalyptic scenario, except to say that “the white world” would somehow come to an end, as this excerpt from the speech will serve to illustrate:

When The Honorable Elijah Muhammad says “end of the world,” he does not mean the end of the earth; he is referring to the end of a race of “world of people,” and their removal from this earth: the removal of their world. There are many “worlds” here on this earth: the Buddhist world, Hindu world, Jewish world, Christian world—Capitalist world, Communist world, Socialist world—Eastern world and Western world—Oriental world and Occidental world—dark world and white world. Which of these many worlds has come to the end of its rope, the end of its time? Look around you at all of the signs and you will agree that it is the end of time for the Western world, the European world, the Christian world, the white world.<sup>42</sup>

This was public discourse. The nitty-gritty detail of the Black Muslim apocalypse was, in fact, reserved for private discourse, which FBI surveillance tapes would later disclose:

LITTLE [Malcolm X] told this group that there was a space ship 40 miles up which was built by the wise men of the East and in this space ship there are a number of smaller space ships and each one is loaded with bombs. LITTLE stated that when ELIJAH MOHAMMED of Chicago, Illinois, gives the word these ships will descend on the United States, bomb it and destroy all the “white devils”. According to LITTLE these bombs will destroy all the “devils” in the United States and that all the Muslims in good standing will be spared. LITTLE claimed that their Prophet ELIJAH MOHAMMED was sent to the United States 20 years ago to save the “Black people.”<sup>43</sup>

The new information disclosed here is that Elijah Muhammad himself would give the order for the destruction to start. Note that Whites are not called “people,” but instead are objectified—and demonized, quite literally—as “devils.” The word “people” (with the connotation of “human”) is reserved for “Black people” alone. This judgment, therefore, is not a judgment of individuals, but of races and religions. All good Muslims would be spared. The clear implication here is that Blacks who are not Black Muslims would not be spared. They would, however, be warned in advance of the impending doom. Not to be unjust, just how would all good Muslims be spared? In another FBI surveillance tape, Malcolm X is reported to have said:



First the planes would drop pamphlets written in Arabic and English explaining that they should get on to your own kind at once. He stated at this time the Muslims would have already left North America, and you would have to find a way out for yourself. He stated that next there would come a trumpet so piercing to your ears that it would drive men insane, pregnant women would have their babies, and some would drop dead. The last part of the destruction would be an airplane returning ALLAH to the Almighty God Himself. He would light a match that would cause a fire which no man could put out.<sup>44</sup>

America will literally be burned alive by divine conflagration. It was only during his stellar rise as a minister of the Nation of Islam, from 1952 until late 1959, that Malcolm X talked about the Mother Plane. Thereafter, he appeared to abandon that topic altogether. "As the profile of the Nation grew in the national press," Wayne Taylor observes, "Malcolm eschewed his earlier musings on the mother ship and shifted his focus to more earthly matters."<sup>45</sup> This raises a question: did Malcolm X simply shift his focus to more practical matters, or did he actually reject the myth of the Mother Ship? If so, would this not have signaled a departure from the NOI norm, or mark a crisis in faith? Taylor seems to suggest that both answers are true: "In his struggle to bring African Americans closer to a paradise on earth, Malcolm turned away from the fantastic visions and began to concentrate on creating brotherhood in the African Diaspora through political and economic strategies."<sup>46</sup> Still, for the seven years that he would teach his fellow Black Muslims about the Mother Plane, the result was electric, for it had such great appeal for the rank-and-file Black Muslim: "Malcolm's racialized vision of the Armageddon captivated an audience desperate for deliverance."<sup>47</sup> Yet, despite Malcolm's eschewal of it, the myth persisted having, as it were, a life of its own.

In fact, the Mother Wheel Myth was remarkably long-lived. Four decades after Malcolm's 1955 speech, Louis Farrakhan spoke at the Mosque Maryam in Chicago, on June 9, 1996, on the topic: "The Divine Destruction of America: Can She Avert It?" In no uncertain terms, Farrakhan said that God's "intention is the total destruction of America." Corrupt to the core, America is the Babylon whose destruction was foretold in the Book of Revelation, for "No city or people answers the description of a mystery Babylon better than the cities and the people of America." After describing various cataclysms that would take place, Farrakhan described a giant spacecraft called the "Mother Plane" (or "Mother Wheel").<sup>48</sup> His description of it reveals how meticulously Farrakhan had followed Elijah Muhammad's teaching.

Literally made in Japan, the "giant Mother Plane"—which White people have sighted and called unidentified flying objects (UFOs)—was foretold by the prophet Ezekiel, who described it as "a wheel that looked like a cloud

by day but a pillar of fire by night.” This was the creation of “some of the original [Black] scientists” and “took 15 billion dollars in gold at that time to build it.” This gargantuan warship, “made of the toughest steel,” is “a half mile by a half mile,” “is like a small human built planet,” and is like a giant hangar, housing 1,500 smaller ships, each of which is equipped with three “drill bombs.” “And the final act of destruction,” Farrakhan warns, “will be that Allah will make a wall out of the atmosphere over and around North America.” God will then “cut a shortage in gravity and a fire will start from 13-layers up and burn down, burning the atmosphere.” America will then “burn for 310 years and take 690 years to cool off.”<sup>49</sup>

All this might seem fanciful enough. Farrakhan, after all, was simply elaborating on what Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X had previously said. But one gets the impression that Farrakhan may have completely bought into the myth. In 1985, Farrakhan had a vision, in which he was actually taken up in this heretofore imaginary spacecraft. Mattias Gardell describes Farrakhan’s reported experience as follows:

In the vision, Farrakhan walked up a mountain to an Aztec temple together with some companions. When he got to the top of the mountain, a UFO appeared. Farrakhan immediately realized the importance of the moment. . . . Farrakhan, feeling a bit afraid, asked his companions to go with him but was corrected from the spacecraft: “Just you, brother Farrakhan.” He walked and was placed next to the pilot. The spacecraft took off with Farrakhan, who knew that the pilot was sent by God and was to take him to the Mother Wheel. After being inside, he heard the well-known voice of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, which confirmed his being alive. Farrakhan was authorized to lead his God-fearing people through these latter days. The Messiah spoke many things and a scroll full of divine cursive writing was rolled down inside Farrakhan’s head. The spaceship shot out of the tunnel and the pilot took the plane up to a terrific height and maneuvered the vehicle to allow Farrakhan to look down on the wheel. He saw a city, a magnificent city, the New Jerusalem, in the sky. Instead of going back to Mexico, the craft carried him with terrific speed to Washington, DC, and dropped him off outside of the city. He walked into the capital and delivered his announcement, the final warning to the United States government.<sup>50</sup>

Louis Farrakhan was certainly not the only one to believe in the actual existence of the Mother Wheel. Most Black Muslims, in fact, believed in the reality of this fantastic spacecraft after Farrakhan’s verification of its existence. According to Dr. Vibert White, Jr., author of *Inside the Nation of Islam*, great excitement was generated in February 1984 on “Saviour’s Day,” an annual NOI event when, in his speech, Louis Farrakhan spoke of his

personal experience of the Mother Plane. This ignited a wave of interest and expectation throughout the Nation of Islam, as Dr. White further relates:

When the Nation's ministers started to follow the lead of Farrakhan in lecturing at length on the Mother Plane, members of the Nation became possessed with the Mother Plane story. For instance, in Fruit of Islam classes that were held in the basement of the Final Call building in Chicago, a week did not pass before several brothers reported that they had seen the Mother Plane. In fact, it was not unusual for members to stay up all night looking and pointing out the Mother Plane. Strangely, as it sounds now, I reported that not only did I see the Mother Plane but, also, had a vision of the craft before observing it.<sup>51</sup>

This testimony shows how effectively this “technological monstrosity”<sup>52</sup> had captured the imagination of Black Muslims. Note how Dr. White’s “vision” of the Mother Plane preceded—and probably preconditioned—his reported sighting of it. After the 1995 Million Man March, however, Vibert White became increasingly disillusioned with Louis Farrakhan, and critical of the Nation of Islam. Eventually, Dr. White left the Nation in 1996,<sup>53</sup> having been a member for some 20 years. Two years later, in October 1998, Dr. White embraced the Baha’i Faith, following a presentation by the present writer in the Baha’i Center in Springfield, Illinois.

As for Farrakhan himself, he apparently began to follow much the same course as Warith Deen Mohammed, in finding his way to authentic Islam. It just took Farrakhan a lot longer to do so. First diagnosed in 1991 with prostate cancer, Farrakhan faced a crisis in his personal health that some say may have precipitated a crisis of faith with respect to the teachings of his preceptor and predecessor, Elijah Muhammad. Without actually renouncing Elijah Muhammad’s teachings, Farrakhan took a decisive move in openly committing himself to mainstream Islam. How sincere this move was is still open to question.

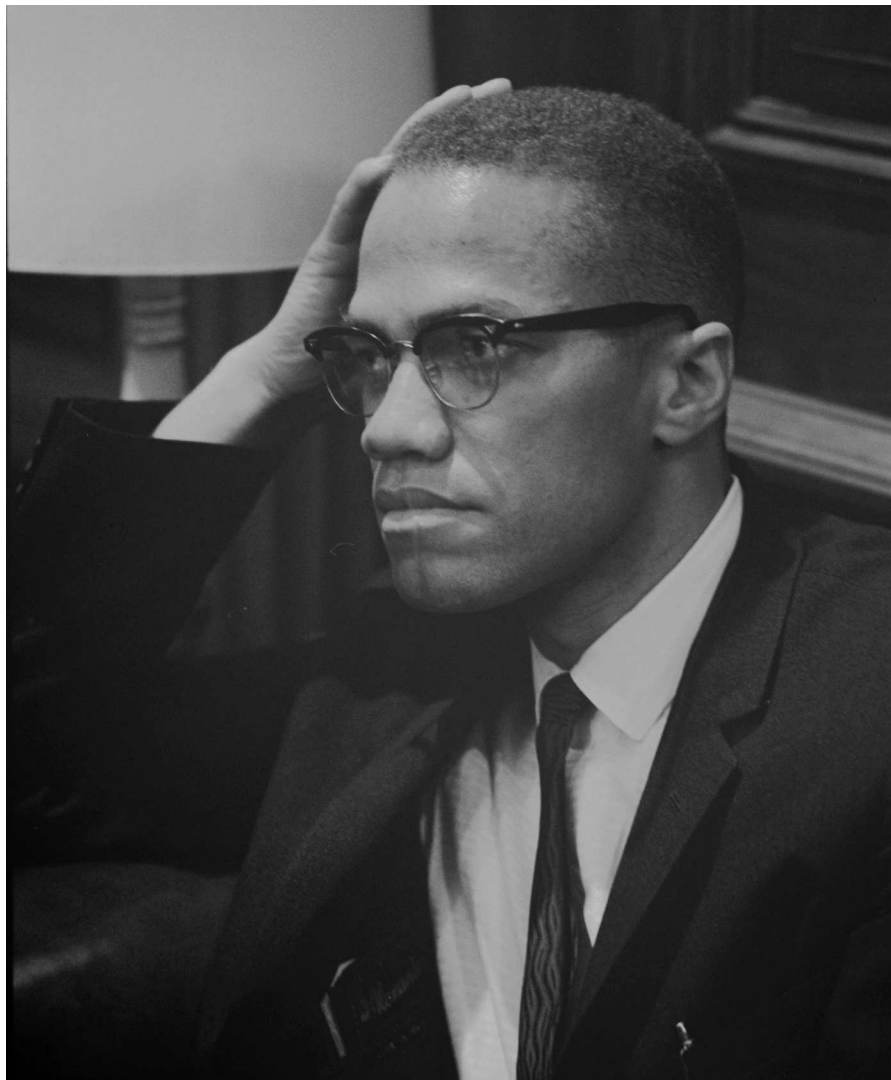
Writing for the Religious News Service in 1999, Arthur J. Magida, author of *Prophet of Rage: A Life of Louis Farrakhan and His Nation*, reported that Farrakhan was rumored to have distanced himself away from Elijah Muhammad’s teachings in favor of traditional Islam, and was steering the NOI leadership in that same direction:

While there has been no public statement by Farrakhan that he is divorcing himself from these central tenets of the Nation of Islam, he reportedly told a closed-door meeting here of Nation of Islam ministers from around the country in late January or early February that they should disregard the “old teachings.”<sup>54</sup>

The far more public rapprochement came one year later. On February 25, 2000, during a Jumu'ah prayer service held at the McCormick Center as part of the Nation of Islam's Saviours' Day 2000 celebration in Chicago, Farrakhan and Deen embraced in a symbolic show of reconciliation.<sup>55</sup> Notwithstanding Farrakhan's show of solidarity with traditional Islam, Warith Deen Mohammed remained critical of the Nation of Islam. After his August 10, 2007, lecture at the Clinton Presidential Library, W. D. Mohammed told the press: "The time for those leaders who had that hate rhetoric has come and passed and they know it." He added: "For the last 10 years or more, they've just been selling wolf tickets to the white race and having fun while they collect money and have fancy lifestyles."<sup>56</sup> Warith Deen Mohammed passed away on September 9, 2008.<sup>57</sup>

The Nation of Islam is significant in part because it gave so many African Americans, whether Black Muslims or not, a renewed identity, and fired them with new hope and resolve. Despite its inchoate racism and the internal corruption of the NOI itself, NOI rhetoric served as the voice of an oppressed people, as a theology of liberation, and even as the conscience of America itself. Before its recent reconciliation with traditional Islam, the original message of the Nation of Islam was one of Black superiority and White inferiority, a Black God in place of a White God, and Black Nation to be set apart from any White nation.<sup>58</sup> The Nation of Islam preached, and continues to preach, a gospel of Black nationalism. In the Yacub Myth, the NOI had formulated a negative theology of America, perhaps more aptly described as a *theodicy* (explanation of the origins of evil and of "God's justice"). Over time, the Yacub Myth had become an embarrassment for the Nation. If not sheer madness, the myth was a social liability. Its ideology of Black supremacy, which was once a bulwark against White supremacy, ultimately became a barrier to interracial harmony. Over the years, though, the social message of the NOI has softened considerably as the Nation of Islam began to embrace traditional Islam.

As recently as February 24, 2008, Farrakhan said of a non-Muslim candidate for the U.S. presidency, Senator Barack Obama: "A black man with a white mother became a savior to us. . . . A black man with a white mother could turn out to be one who can lift America from her fall."<sup>59</sup> This single statement implicitly marks the utter abrogation of the Yacub Myth, for Obama cannot be a "savior" if his mother was a White "devil"! The wider implications of Farrakhan's endorsement of Senator Obama are equally clear: The Nation of Islam has largely abandoned, although not abnegated, its own religious myths of America, in favor of an egalitarian vision of America. However, as Chapter 9 will demonstrate, Farrakhan is still a firebrand of religious racism and anti-Semitism, although he is quick to deny it.



*Figure 9.2.* Malcolm X, prominent Nation of Islam minister, at Martin Luther King press conference on March 26, 1964. That same month, Malcolm X resigned his position in the Nation of Islam and renounced Elijah Muhammad over the latter's infidelities.

Later in 1964, having converted to Sunni Islam, Malcolm X went on pilgrimage to Mecca, where he met "blonde-haired, blue-eyed men I could call my brothers." Meanwhile, FBI informants reported that Malcolm X was marked for assassination by the Nation of Islam leadership. On February 21, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated onstage in Manhattan's Audubon Ballroom.

(Public domain. Library of Congress. Photo by Marion S. Trikosko. See <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003688131/>. Accessed January 12, 2015.)

## Chapter 9 Update: Separation, Not Integration

*Beloved followers of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad under my leadership: . . . Does not America need a messenger of God? . . . Elijah Muhammad spoke to a specific people under a specific condition in a specific country that needs to be guided and warned. . . . Master Fard Muhammad: I could not dishonor The Work that He did by denying Him.*

—Louis Farrakhan (2014)<sup>60</sup>

Louis Farrakhan has warned President Obama: America is in danger, from a UFO.

Recently, the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan is less controversial. But he is more outspoken. As if to crank up the volume, many more videos of Farrakhan’s speeches are now online than when this book was first published in 2009. By far, Farrakhan’s most significant—and controversial—recent pronouncements are his lecture series, “The Time and What Must Be Done.” Videos and transcripts of these speeches, in 58 parts, are immediately accessible online.<sup>61</sup> Part 58 is quite a finale. It culminates not only in a message to President Barack Obama, it also proclaims the divine authority of Farrakhan himself.

“The Time and What Must Be Done” series is a mythological gold mine of Black Muslim doctrines. In Part 41, “Guidance for Our President and Our Nation,” Farrakhan announced: “Our world of Islam needs to be reformed! And that reform will not be guided by those in the East, that Guidance for reform of the Islamic world is coming out of the West—and we, The Nation of Islam, are that Light!”<sup>62</sup>

By what authority does Farrakhan speak? The answer is simple: he is empowered to speak with divine authority. Here’s how it works; this is the flow of divine guidance: Farrakhan believes in the Prophet Muhammad. No doubt about that. That makes him a Muslim, for sure—except for the fact that Farrakhan does *not* acknowledge Muhammad to be the “Seal of the Prophets.” That distinction, that title, properly belongs to Elijah Muhammad:

“The Seal of The Prophets” means it is an individual that is “sealed with The Wisdom of God” that lets the world know that he is authentic. So they, Jesus and Muhammad, prefigured The Coming of “The Great Mahdi” and “The Great Messiah”: Master Fard Muhammad and The Honorable Elijah Muhammad—who was given The Knowledge that Seals The Books; The Scriptures!

I represent those Two Men!<sup>63</sup>

Problem: Farrakhan is not entirely consistent here. Earlier he stated:

Master Fard Muhammad: “The Mahdi” and “The Christ” are one and the same. . . .

Master Fard Muhammad, Who is The Master of The Wheel . . .  
“Allah came in the Person of Master W. Fard Muhammad.”<sup>64</sup>

Either way (whoever of the two is “The Great Messiah”), the “Seal of the Prophets” is not Muhammad, but Elijah Muhammad. He is also foretold by the Prophet Muhammad. “Does not America need a messenger of God?”<sup>65</sup> Farrakhan asks rhetorically? The obvious answer (or the expected response) is a resounding “Yes!” From this we gather that Elijah Muhammad is the Messenger of God to America: “Elijah Muhammad spoke to a specific people under a specific condition in a specific country that needs to be guided and warned.”<sup>66</sup> Louis Farrakhan carries forward that divine mission to America. Another proof that Farrakhan is on a mission from God, with a message to America, is that there is a sign in the sky, the Mother Wheel.

This is no longer private discourse to be shared among Black Muslims, who are advisedly discreet, circumspect, careful not to divulge this information publicly. Private discourse is now public discourse. Farrakhan is a public figure, and his outreach is impressive. Given his recent public disclosures, with their extraordinary claims, it’s surprising that Farrakhan has not attracted more public attention lately.

Farrakhan tweets. His audience is huge: 307,815 followers (as of October 7, 2014). His tweets are being rebranded as “The Twitter Sayings of the Honorable Louis Farrakhan.” So it is no surprise that Farrakhan’s tweets have taken on a canonical status as an extension of his teachings. To a certain extent, these tweets reveal how Farrakhan’s mind works in real Twitter time.

His Twitter account tracks recent speeches and opinions. It also refreshes old videos and articles. This mix of new and old uses the old to reinforce the new. As a prostate cancer survivor, Farrakhan apparently has not mellowed as much as might be expected. He continues to bask in the adoration of his followers, and those charmed by his charisma. He is still a captivating speaker. His oratorical skills are finely honed and tuned into the emotional and attitudinal nerves of those receptive to his message.

## **The Honorable Elijah Muhammad is Alive Myth**

One man’s myth may be another man’s reality. On October 7, 2014, Louis Farrakhan tweeted: “I don’t represent a dead man! Not only is the Honorable Elijah Muhammad alive and well, he is in power now.”<sup>67</sup> This is important. Not so much because it keeps the memory of Elijah Muhammad alive—by claiming that he is, in fact, alive and well and in control. That Elijah Muhammad is alive bolsters Farrakhan’s own authority. He receives his messages from a messenger of God. As the chosen representative, Farrakhan delivers speeches and statements that may be considered to be messages from God.

in other words, Farrakhan speaks with prophetic authority. He has someone to be reckoned with. His messages should not be dismissed lightly. To do so would be at America's peril.

Farrakhan continues to speak with prophetic thunder. He is, after all, a thunderbolt from heaven. The "Seal of the Prophets" (Elijah Muhammad) has sent him. Farrakhan receives his orders from above. He continues to represent Elijah Muhammad, who is still alive—still powerful, still in control—who rides in a spaceship in outer space, and threatens America with destruction in the name of divine retribution for its racism.

## The Mother Wheel Myth

The Mother Wheel Myth is the Nation of Islam's most central and vital myth, according to Stephen C. Finley: "The Wheel, and its adjectival modifier 'Mother' is central to understanding cosmology in Farrakhan's NOI." And further: "Louis Farrakhan's visionary experience of being carried onto the Mother Wheel—an unidentified flying object to the world outside the Nation of Islam (NOI)—was the most significant religious event of his life."<sup>68</sup> On Saturday, February 15, 2014, the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan aired the series finale (Part 58) of his year-long lecture series, "The Time and What Must Be Done." In this final broadcast, Farrakhan reaffirms the reality of the Mother Wheel, and calls upon President Barack Obama to open up Area 51 in order to reveal this massive UFO—God's "Calling Card":

President Obama: Let's open up Roswell! Summon the scientists from all over the world to America under your auspices, and you go with them—along with Presidents Carter, Clinton, and with President Bush "41" and Bush "43," and look at what Allah sent to you, and study it!

And if you think there can be a better world from the knowledge that Allah (God) introduced for us to use—why, that was like a man coming to you, giving you his card, and giving you his address and telephone number, saying, "If you'd like to reach me, just call me."

Well, Allah (God) says: "I am sending you a Wheel—a few of them—as 'My Calling Card'." . . .

Who is behind this Wheel? It is Allah (God) Who is introducing Himself to you, America. That He is present, now, and He comes to take over the rule of the planet and its people; and He is offering you a place, if you submit! But if you fight Him, then you cause Him to use the Awesome Power that He has to remove you totally, completely, irreversibly from the face of the Earth.

Rulers of America: It's your choice. I say this as The Servant of The Great Mahdi and The Great Messiah that is representing this to you. . . .

I am from that Wheel, and They Who are on that Wheel are my Guides and my Support! . . . My dear brother, President Obama: You can, from



your high office, help America to save herself, and the American people, from The Wrath of God. . . .<sup>69</sup>

The Mother Wheel Myth is alive and well, as of 2014. Louis Farrakhan should know. He was transported to the Mother Wheel. He now serves as the emissary of the “Great Mahdi” (Master Fard Muhammad) and the “Great Messiah” (the Honorable Elijah Muhammad). This myth implicates the Destruction of America Myth.

## **The Yacub Myth**

The problem with America is that it has been dominated by the White race. A renegade Black scientist, Yakub (a.k.a. Yacub, Yacoub, Jacob), was responsible for creating the White race. In his lecture, “How Satan Came Into Existence” (Part 28), Farrakhan, by quoting his mentor, Elijah Muhammad, effectively recycles and reinvigorates a myth that purports to explain the creation of the White race as a result of selective breeding of recessive genes:

The History of Yakub and The Origin of his “Made Man” . . .

[Yakub] “learned, from studying the germ of the black man, under the microscope, that there were two people in him, and that one was Black, the other [was] brown. He said if he could successfully separate the one from the other, he could graft the brown germ into its last stage, which would be white.”<sup>70</sup>

Judging from the title of this highly mythic sermon, the “Satan” that “came into existence” was the White race. The White race is about to be judged. America is about to be destroyed.

## **The Destruction of America Myth**

In the final sermon of the “The Time and What Must Be Done” series, Farrakhan does not mince words as to the real danger and imminent threat that America faces:

As the God of Ezekiel, Moses, Jesus, Prophet Muhammad, I, too, am backed by the same God Who backed the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. . . .

Who is behind this Wheel? It is Allah (God) Who is introducing Himself to you, America. . . . But if you fight Him, then you cause Him to use the Awesome Power that He has to remove you totally, completely, irreversibly from the face of the Earth.<sup>71</sup>

This dire fate, however, may be averted.

## Vision Of A Black Homeland

Integration won't work. Independence will.

One way that America can avert destruction by divine retribution is to give the Black man his due by way of reparations. Granting land to serve as a Black homeland, with continued support by the American government, would do the trick. This demand is reiterated in every single issue of *The Final Call* newspaper, which is the official organ of the Nation of Islam. Farrakhan recently reminded the public, as well as his Black Muslim audience, of this long-standing call for reparations:

So, you are “separate,” but very, very unequal. . . . So now, your desire is to integrate into the major colonial power—not completely separate from them? . . .

This brings us back to the words of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad in “Point No. 4” of The Muslim Program that appears on the back page of each edition of *The Final Call* newspaper: We should separate; that America should look after us “in a separate state or territory for the next 20 to 25 years, until we are able to produce our own needs.” . . .

And you, America, should help us: . . . And then let our people have a vote as to whether they wish to form a nation of their own. . . .

And if they offer you anything, look carefully into it, lest The Nation will no longer be tied to the principles that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad desired for us:

To make us an independent nation on some of this Earth that we can call our own.<sup>72</sup>

This sounds like Farrakhan is advocating that the U.S. government should hold a referendum in which African-Americans would be offered the choice to form “a separate state or territory”<sup>73</sup> that would function as “an independent nation.”<sup>74</sup> Here, Farrakhan is putting all his cards on the table: America can give Black people their own homeland, or face destruction. That's Farrakhan's message to President Barack Obama and the American nation.

These “principles” operate as ongoing demands. How seriously and forcefully Farrakhan will continue to press these demands remains to be seen. Make no mistake about these demands. They are clear and forceful: “We must be separated from our former slave masters, and we must by the order of Allah (God) become an independent nation.”<sup>75</sup> By pressing a distinction between “independence” and “integration,” the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan may be creating a false dichotomy.

## Conclusion

Farrakhan's comments on current events keep him relevant. His opinions on the news are potentially newsworthy in themselves. Yet there has been little reporting of Farrakhan's recent opinions. He is now sidelined. The national notoriety that Farrakhan once enjoyed is on the wane. Even though he is in fine form as a speaker, Farrakhan has not reinvented himself, judging by the fact that he recycles the old Black Muslim myths, which become more and more outdated over time, as fewer are willing to suspend their disbelief in the colorful and fantastic mythology that animates the Nation of Islam's Black Nationalist ideology. Farrakhan continues to recycle myths that many consider to be as dysfunctional as they are improbable.

If this analysis has merit, it may be all the more reason why Farrakhan is broadcasting his claim to divine authority: "I am directly from The Christ and The Messiah!"<sup>76</sup> The Prophet Muhammad, as well as the holy Qur'an, are still relevant. They are edifying. But Farrakhan's primary message is to America. In the final analysis, Farrakhan's mission is not so much about Islam as it is about reparations. But the quest for a separate homeland is a mission impossible.

Farrakhan warns that integration is colonizing in disguise. The former slave masters have created a system that will continue to repress Black people:

"Separation," a familiar concept to America that now must be applied to The Black Nation.

We believe in "separation." We believe that integration is a hypocritical trick to make us think that our 400-year-old enemy has all of a sudden become our "friend." They'll let you into the bedroom, and keep you right at the door of the boardroom.<sup>77</sup>

African Americans require land. They need capital. They must start producing. Ideally, they should form a separate community. They should be self-sufficient. All the while, such an enterprise should be carried out under the divine guidance of Farrakhan, who is empowered by Allah to guide Black Muslims. He is on friendly terms with Muslim leaders. But they are the leaders of other Muslims, while Farrakhan continues to lead Black Muslims. For how much longer, it's hard to say.

The Nation of Islam's myths and visions of America have a certain interconnected "logic" that makes sense internally, if one is ready to accept these, lock, stock and barrel. There is no independent survey, at least that the present writer is aware of, that measures to what extent Black Muslims really believe in Yakub, in the Mother Wheel, and in all the related phenomena that Louis Farrakhan is reporting, especially as a message to President Barack Obama in the finale of "The Time and What Must Be Done" series.

That series of 58 sermons offers a rich mine for present and future research on the Nation of Islam. The series serves as a recapitulation of all prior messages, sermons, and writings of Elijah Muhammad, as well as of Farrakhan himself. This primary source material opens up windows of insights into the ideology and agenda of the Nation of Islam in an unprecedented way. It is up to others to judge whether or not the Nation of Islam has been represented fairly in this chapter.

## Notes

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2. Louis Farrakhan, "The Divine Destruction of America: Can She Avert It?" Speech delivered by the Honorable Louis Farrakhan, June 9, 1996, at Mosque Maryam in Chicago. *Final Call News* (1996). See [http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/Minister\\_Louis\\_Farrakhan\\_9/article\\_7595.shtml](http://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/Minister_Louis_Farrakhan_9/article_7595.shtml). (Accessed November 10, 2014.)
3. Sophia Tareen, "A Spry Farrakhan Sings Obama's Praises." Associated Press, February 24, 2008.
4. Michael Lieb, "'Above Top Secret': The Nation of Islam and the Advent of the 'Mother Plane'." *Criterion* 43.1 (2004): 2–11, 38.
5. Kelefa Sanneh, "The Secret Doctrine: A Conversation with Killah Priest." *Transition* 74 (1997): 162–182.
6. *Ibid.*, 173–174.
7. Killah Priest, "Madness." From the album, *Priesthood* (Babygrande Records, 2005).
8. Malcolm X, "Black Man's History." *The End of White-World Supremacy: Four Speeches by Malcolm X*. Ed. Benjamin Karim (New York: Little, Brown, 1971), 24.
9. Farrakhan's recording of "A White Man's Heaven Is a Black Man's Hell" is available online as a You Tube video. A rap by the same title was recorded by the musical group, Public Enemy, on their CD, *Muse Sick N Hour Mess Age*, but is not Farrakhan's song.
10. Qtd. in Louis A. DeCaro, *Malcolm and the Cross: The Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, and Christianity* (New York/London: New York University Press, 1998), 29.
11. Qtd. in Louis A. DeCaro, *Malcolm and the Cross*, 25.
12. Qtd. in Louis A. DeCaro, *Malcolm and the Cross*, 26.
13. Malcolm X, "There's a Worldwide Revolution Going On." *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches*. Ed. Bruce Perry (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1989), 123.
14. Terrill, Robert E. "Protest, Prophecy, and Prudence in the Rhetoric of Malcolm X." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 4.1 (2001): 25–53 [41].
15. Malcolm X, "Black Man's History." *The End of White-World Supremacy: Four Speeches by Malcolm X*. Ed. Benjamin Karim (New York: Little, Brown, 1971).
16. *Ibid.*, 42.
17. *Ibid.*, 44.

18. Ibid., 55.
19. Ibid., 56.
20. Ibid., 56.
21. Ibid., 56.
22. Ibid., 57.
23. Ibid., 57.
24. Ibid., 61.
25. Ibid., 63.
26. Ibid., 51.
27. Elijah Muhammad, Chapter 127: "The Battle in the Sky." *Message to the Blackman in America* (Bensenville, IL: Lushena Books, 2000 [1965]), 294.
28. Michael Lieb, "Armageddon and the Final Call." *Children of Ezekiel: Aliens, UFOs, the Crisis of Race, and the Advent of End Time* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1998), 198–229; 293–298.
29. Mattias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 153.
30. Ibid., 164.
31. Ibid., 164.
32. Claude Andrew Clegg III, *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 66.
33. Elijah Muhammad, "The Mother Plane."
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Clegg, *An Original Man*, 64.
37. Ibid., 64.
38. Ibid., 66.
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40. Ibid., 67.
41. Malcolm X, "God's Judgement of America." *The End of White World Supremacy*. Ed. Imam B. Karim (New York: Seaver Books, 1971): 121–148; Mattias Gardell, "Countdown to Armageddon: Minister Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam in the Latter Days." *Temenos* 31 (1995): 253–262.
42. Ibid. (emphasis added).
43. FBI Surveillance file, March 16, 1954. Qtd. in Wayne Taylor, "Premillennium Tension: Malcolm X and the Eschatology of the Nation of Islam." *Souls* 7.1 (Winter 2005): 52–65 [63].
44. FBI Surveillance file, May 23, 1955. Qtd. in Taylor, "Premillennium Tension," 64.
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*Figure 10.1.* Architecturally impressive, the Islamic Center of America, located in Dearborn, Michigan (the unofficial capital of Arab Americans), is the largest mosque in America. It is a Shi'a, rather than a Sunni, Muslim institution.

(Photo by Dane Hillard, July 21, 2008. Permission by Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 license, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/legalcode>. Black & white version of color original.)



## Chapter 10

# Contemporary Muslim Myths and Visions of America

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*Let the entire world hear me. Our hostility to the Great Satan [America] is absolute. . . . I conclude my speech with the slogan that will continue to reverberate on all occasions so that nobody will think that we have weakened. Regardless of how the world has changed after 11 September, Death to America will remain our reverberating and powerful slogan: Death to America.*

— Hassan Nasrallah (2002)<sup>1</sup>

*A civil war is raging within the soul of Islam pitting radicals, along with their terrorist offspring, against moderate Muslims who wish to embrace modern democratic, social, and economic principles. The subjects of this dispute are encapsulated by America. In effect, then, America has become a party to that religious war.*

— Hillel Fradkin (2004)<sup>2</sup>

In 2005, an African American Muslim was asked what it was like living in post-9/11 America.

“It’s like being Black,” he replied, “Twice.”<sup>3</sup>

The terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, have cast a spotlight on the American Muslim community.<sup>4</sup> The pressures that American Muslims have come to experience are exacerbated by anti-American sentiments voiced abroad by Radical Islamists, who may be defined as “anyone who wants to govern a country in accordance with the Shari’a, Islamic law”<sup>5</sup> and who resorts to terror or force to reassert the Shari’a. As a result of such anti-Americanism overseas and as a consequence of Islamophobia (fear and loathing of Islam and Muslims) at home, many American Muslims feel like they are on “trial” in both their public and their private lives. To create a framework of social significance within which to situate this entire discussion, consider the fact that the reciprocal

demonization between the United States and Iran impacts American Muslims at home, who thereby experience the worst of two modes of prejudice: religious and racial.

The problem of anti-Americanism abroad by radical Islamists is largely one of religious nationalism. Nationalism and religion often combine to form religious nationalism, as stated in Chapter 1. “Religious nationalism is the fusion of nationalism and religion such that they are inseparable,” according to Barbara-Ann J. Rieffer.<sup>6</sup> “It is a community of religious people or the political movement of a group of people heavily influenced by religious beliefs who aspire to be politically self-determining.”<sup>7</sup> The Palestinians, Chechens, Filipino Moros, and Kashmiris are cases of religious nationalism that arise in conjunction with liberation movements.<sup>8</sup> Among such groups, it is the religious nationalism of the Islamic Republic of Iran that has generated the most salient and powerful religious myth of America within the contemporary Muslim world. On January 29, 2002, U.S. President George W. Bush responded with his “State of the Union Address” in which he vilified Iran as a cohort in the “Axis of Evil” that also includes Iraq (under Saddam Hossein) and North Korea. Here is a classic case of myth and counter-myth, in the context of reciprocal demonization. This mutually reinforcing demonization has greatly exacerbated the problem of Islamophobia in the United States, which perpetuates an unhealthy, even if understandable, state of affairs with respect to interfaith relations and the simple, everyday encounter of Muslims and non-Muslims in the streets of American cities.

## The “Great Satan” Myth

The first thing that comes to mind when the topics of “Islam” and “America” are brought together is the image of America as “the Great Satan” in the eyes of Iran and elsewhere. For nearly three decades, Revolutionary Iran has stigmatized the United States as “the Great Satan.” As the name suggests, “Satan” is the archetypal principality of evil, both in Islam (where his Qur’anic name is Iblis) and in Christianity (known also as Lucifer) alike. Loathsome and odious, “the Great Satan” evokes contempt and outrage; use of this name is meant to rally Muslims around a common enemy—America.

It was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—supreme leader of Revolutionary Iran, credited as the first “Islamist” government in the twentieth century—who, on November 5, 1979, demonized America as “the Great Satan, the wounded snake.”<sup>9</sup> Russia was named the “Other Satan” and Britain the “Little Satan.” Other countries in the West have been variously branded as Little Satans, as has Israel. “The use of the term Great Satan was in fact a brilliant rhetorical device used by Khomeini to great effect during the course of the hostage crisis,” writes William O. Beeman, author of *The “Great Satan” vs. the “Mad Mullahs”: How the United States and*

*Iran Demonize Each Other*.<sup>10</sup> This is rhetorical essentialism at the height of its evocative power.

Here, the demonization is quite literal: America is vilified as the greatest of all demonic powers, Satan himself. “No image could be more deeply evocative than the characterization of the United States as the Great Satan by Iran,” Beeman adds.<sup>11</sup> This inflammatory rhetoric articulated a powerful myth of America that has swept across the Middle East and beyond. And the image of America as “the Great Satan” is deeply embedded in anti-American rhetoric. One year after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, Hezbollah Leader Nasrallah, on September 27, 2002, reignited the inflammatory rhetoric to keep the fires of hate ablaze:

Let the entire world hear me. Our hostility to the Great Satan is absolute. . . . I conclude my speech with the slogan that will continue to reverberate on all occasions so that nobody will think that we have weakened. Regardless of how the world has changed after 11 September, “Death to America” will remain our reverberating and powerful slogan: “Death to America.”<sup>12</sup>

The Great Satan myth is a national and transnational myth that gives meaning and moment to Iranian anti-imperialism and Islamic radicalism. It is important to situate the Great Satan myth in its historical context. In 1979, the Islamic Revolution of Iran overthrew Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who had ruled over Iran for over 35 years. From the early 1940s forward, the Pahlavi regime attempted to reform Iranian society along Western lines. The Shah of Iran established a civil service. He also instituted a national bank based on the European model. This process of secularization and Westernization proceeded apace, the Shah eventually replaced Islamic and traditional courts with civil courts. In keeping with previous reforms, these courts followed canons of Western jurisprudence. At a distance, in the view of Western observers at least, these reforms were generally progressive, as they were intended by the Shah to be.

The Shah’s progressive policies, however, were ultimately undone by his repressive policies. To make matters worse, he was also seen as a puppet of the West, since he was re-enthroned in August 1953 after the overthrow of Premier Mohammad Mossadeq in a military coup, instigated by the CIA under the code name “TP-AJAX” (or “Operation Ajax”)—an operation that entailed considerable covert U.S. financial and political support.<sup>13</sup> The perception of the Shah as a stooge of the West was reinforced by his frequent diplomatic visits with Presidents Nixon and Carter. To make matters worse, the Shah was seen not only to be repressive, but corrupt, as oil revenues were diverted to the military, or directly to the Shah himself, and away from the vast majority of Iranians, who otherwise stood to benefit from oil revenues. For these and other reasons, the Shah’s western-style

reforms—particularly his programs promoting modernization and secularization—had largely become ineffective by the 1970s. Significant sectors of the Iranian population had already been alienated.<sup>14</sup> Animosity toward the Shah of Iran mounted, and that very discontent was a social resource that could be exploited to its fullest. Regime change was in the offing. It would prove inevitable.

Led by Ayatollah Khomeini, the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran was effectively directed by Shi'a clerics, who succeeded in mobilizing the masses in public demonstrations calling for the downfall of the Shah. This anti-Shah movement rejected the current regime's authoritarianism, corruption, maldistribution of wealth, and all-too-rapid westernization of Iran. The national, social, and economic themes of the Revolution, as defined by Khomeini himself, emphasized the importance of religious nationalism, of social justice, of political participation, and of a return to Persian culture. The grassroots religious national movement that Khomeini orchestrated (and oversaw from Paris) demanded an end to corruption, the removal of foreign influences, and respect for religious national identity. The massive street demonstrations were ultimately successful and, in February 1979, the Pahlavi dynasty collapsed. A popular referendum was held in March, mandating a change from monarchy to an Islamic republic. By the end of that year, a new constitution was drafted by a 75-member "Council of Experts," which was likewise ratified by a popular referendum.<sup>15</sup> Khomeini subsequently stigmatized America as "the Great Satan."

In Persian (Farsi) the native expression is "*Shaytán-i Buzurg*."<sup>16</sup> In Arabic, the Great Satan is "*al-Shaytán al-Kabír*." This is the same name as the stele popularly known as *al-Shaytan al-Kabir*, which is the buttness at Al-Muna, where Muslims, as a pilgrimage ritual, stone Satan. What follows is the celebrated 1855 account by Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821–1890) of this Muslim ritual:

We were now to mount for "the Throwing," as a preliminary to which we washed "with seven waters" the seven pebbles brought from Muzdalifah, and bound them in our Ihrams. Our first destination was the entrance to the western end of the long line which composes the Muna village. We found a swarming crowd in the narrow road opposite the "Jamrat al-Akabah," or, as it is vulgarly called, the *Shaytan al-Kabir*—the "Great Devil." . . . The "Shaytan al-Kabir" is a dwarf buttness of rude masonry, about eight feet high by two and a half broad, placed against a rough wall of stones at the Meccan entrance to Muna. As the ceremony of "Ramy," or Lapidation, must be performed on the first day by all pilgrims between sunrise and sunset. . . .

The narrow space was crowded with pilgrims, all struggling like drowning men to approach as near as possible to the Devil; it would have been easy to run over the heads of the mass. . . . I had duly provided myself with a hidden dagger. The precaution was not useless. Scarcely had my donkey

entered the crowd than he was overthrown by a dromedary, and I found myself under the stamping and roaring beast's stomach. Avoiding being trampled upon by a judicious use of the knife, I lost no time in escaping from a place so ignobly dangerous. . . .

Finding an opening, we approached within about five cubits of the place, and holding each stone between the thumb and the forefinger of the right hand, we cast it at the pillar, exclaiming, "In the name of Allah, and Allah is Almighty! (I do this) in Hatred of the Fiend [Satan] and to his Shame."<sup>17</sup>

Although Khomeini's likely allusion to the Muslim ritual of stoning Satan will be lost on most Americans, on closer examination, the implication is obvious: As *al-Shaytán al-Kabír* incarnate, America (and Americans) should be stoned. But what is the Islamic meaning of "stoning" here? While the phrase, the "stoning of Satan," resonates with Muslims generally, the stoning of Satan does not parallel the stoning of the adulterer. In other words, while the punishment for adultery in classical Islam is death by stoning (since adultery is considered a capital offense), there is no legal issue here. Rather, the stoning of Satan is a repudiation of Satan, not an attempt to kill him (especially since he cannot be killed anyway).<sup>18</sup> Thus, the force of the rhetoric behind "the great Satan" is repudiation, not punishment.

In classical Islam, the fallen angel (or jinn) is known by two names in the Qur'an, Iblís and Shaytán. Explaining the relationship between the two names, Canadian Islamicist Andrew Rippin comments:

It is notable that the two names, Iblís and al-Shaytán, are used within the same narrative (Q. 2:30-9; 7:11-25; 20:116-23) in such a manner as to discount a simple blending of separate myths related to these two names; rather, the narrative appears integrated and the change in name is best interpreted to suggest that Iblís gained the name al-Shaytán after his disobedience, which is how the Muslim tradition has frequently understood it.<sup>19</sup>

The connection between Satan and ritual stoning is suggested by the Qur'an itself. When the first man, Adam, was created, God commanded that all of the angels bow down before him. Adam, after all, was the pinnacle of God's creation—a marvel that should elicit the respect and admiration, indeed the veneration, of the heavenly host. The angels obeyed God's command—that is, all except Iblís. Iblís refused (Q. 2:34; 7:11; 15:31; 17:61; 18:50; 20:116; 38:74-5), on the logical, but defective grounds that Adam was a creation from mere clay and water (e.g., Q. 15:33: "I am not going to bow to man whom You have created from clay of moulded mud"). In consequence of this signal act of defiance, God then curses Iblís, calling him "accursed" (*rajím*). The word "accursed" literally means "stoned" (Q. 15:34; 38:77), being a transparent allusion to the rituals of the Islamic pilgrimage (*hájj*),<sup>20</sup> as explained above. God then cast Satan out of heaven, much as he did

with Lucifer in Christian tradition. Thus, Lucifer and Iblís are Christian and Islamic horns on the same diabolical head.

According to Andrew Rippin, classical Islam downplayed the figure of Satan in favor of the fallen angel Iblís who, in some Sufi renditions, is the perfect Muslim because he refused to bow down before anything other than God. Iblís is an ambiguous figure but in making him so, classical Islam avoided the Manichean tendency of Satan. Islam in modern times, however, has moved towards the Satanic “other” in the face of the loss of Muslim communal identity, the challenges of the postcolonial times, the rise of the Wahhabi power with its emphasis on correct action. Thus, “the Great Satan” needs to be seen within the moral framework of modern Islam, not just the categories of conservatism.<sup>21</sup>

The genesis of “Great Satan” rhetoric can be traced back to Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966). John Zimmerman underscores this ideological pedigree: “The 11 September attacks cannot be understood fully without an understanding of the ideas of Sayyid Qutb, who is widely acknowledged as the intellectual godfather for the various modern radical Islamic movements.”<sup>22</sup> As the principal voice for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Sayyid Qutb is the great ideologue for Radical Islamism in general. Early in life, Qutb had embraced Westernization, but reportedly grew disenchanted with it after Israel became a state in 1948, and after experiencing, firsthand, anti-Arab prejudice during his sojourn in the United States as a student in 1949–1951.<sup>23</sup> With his trademark emphasis on Islamic morality and society, Sayyid Qutb championed a return to “pure Islam,” unadulterated by what he perceived to be the pernicious amorality of the West.

Qutb’s writings would later form the theoretical basis and philosophical foundation for a number of Radical Islamist groups today. Indeed, Sayyid Qutb is considered to be the intellectual preceptor of Osama bin Laden, leader of al-Qaeda. In the case of al-Qaeda, in fact, the connection is direct: Sayyid Qutb’s brother, Professor Muhammad Qutb, was a teacher and mentor to the young Osama bin Laden. Qutb’s book, *Ma’álim ‘ala Al-Tariq (Milestones [or Signposts] on the Road, or Landmarks along the Way, 1964)*, was an instant best seller and is widely recognized as one of the most influential Islamist tracts ever written. In his book, *The America I Have Seen (Amrika allati Raaytu)*, Qutb registers this concession regarding the role of America in the world today:

America has a principal role in this world, in the realm of practical matters and scientific research, and in the field of organization, improvement, production, and management. All that requires mind power and muscle are where American genius shines, and all that requires spirit and emotion are where American naiveté and primitiveness become apparent. For humanity to be able to benefit from American genius they must add great strength to the American strength. But humanity makes the gravest of errors and risks losing its account of morals, if it makes America its example in feelings and manners.<sup>24</sup>

Notwithstanding this positive assessment of America from a material standpoint, Sayyid Qutb found American society to be morally bankrupt. Qutb held that contemporary societies, including America, were in a state of Jahiliyyah. In classical Islam, Jahiliyyah (often translated as the “Age of Ignorance”) referred to the pre-Islamic period prior to the advent of the Prophet Muhammad, founder of Islam, in the seventh century. Although Qutb was not the first ideologue to apply the term to contemporary society, the consequence of that pejorative view of the non-Muslim world is what makes Qutb’s cultural critique of America and the West so radical, insofar as “Qutb’s answer to the worldwide state of Jahiliyyah was *jihad*.”<sup>25</sup>

Jihad (Arabic for “struggle”) was primarily, although not exclusively, interpreted by Qutb as holy war, which was “necessary to ‘establish God’s authority on earth . . . to abolish all the Satanic forces and Satanic systems of life’.”<sup>26</sup> Note the rhetoric of Satan here, with reference to the West. The transfer of this stock diabolical imagery to America by Khomeini was as predictable as it was inevitable. Qutb further clarifies his position on Islamic jihad: “Those who recognize the nature of this religion . . . also recognize that the active movement for Islam would have to begin with jihad by the sword, in addition to jihad by teaching. They likewise recognize that this jihad was not a defensive movement.”<sup>27</sup> As for Qutb’s direct impact on al-Qaeda, John Zimmerman concludes:

We may never know what the 19 Al-Qaeda hijackers of 11 September 2001 were thinking as they steered the airplanes toward the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and an open field in Pennsylvania. However, we can be certain that they were immersed in the ideas of Sayyid Qutb.<sup>28</sup>

The Great Satan myth is an official rather than a populist creation, although it enjoys widespread popular appeal. Notwithstanding, many Iranians continue to be enamored of America in various ways. Taking a wider perspective, the Great Satan myth, subsequent to Khomeini’s coining of that invective, has been taken up by radical Islamists outside Iran as well as within. The myth now belongs to the discourse of “Islamic fundamentalism,” also known as radical Islamism. Let us first define what is meant by “radical Islamism” vis-à-vis contemporary Islam.

Islam is not monolithic. In other words, there is a diversity in Islamic orientations. These orientations, in turn, have produced correspondingly diverse discourses. In approaching modern Islam, the present writer has refined a typology that accounts for the wide-ranging, often disparate, and even conflicting attitudes towards the West that find ideological and political expression throughout the Muslim world today. In this approach, the author has taught students (Muslim students included) to clearly differentiate among five Islamic “responses to modernity.” From “right to left,” so to speak, they are the following: (1) Radical Islamism, (2) Traditionalism, (3)

Neo-Traditionalism, (4) Modernism, (5) Secularism, (6) Postmodernism, and (7) Post-Islamism. This typology is based on a fivefold schema developed by William Shepard.<sup>29</sup> However, the present writer will describe these terms in the ways in which they made most sense to students, with occasional reference to a more recent typology advanced by Haroro J. Ingram.<sup>30</sup> Wherever possible, relations back to the myth of the Great Satan will be made by way of additional commentary.

Briefly, what is meant by “modernity”? Andrew Rippin characterizes modernity cumulatively as “that which renders the past problematic.”<sup>31</sup> Peter Berger’s five “dilemmas of modernity” include Abstraction, Futurity, Individuation, Liberation, and Secularization. Similarly, Harvey Cox’s “Five Pillars of Modernity” emphasize the roles of Nationalism, Technology, Bureaucracy, Profit Maximalization, and Secularization. The core values of modernity, now “global values,” derive in part from the individual values of liberty, equality, and fraternity as espoused in the French Revolution, and social values of progress and science-based rationality characteristic of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>32</sup> However one looks at modernity, this much is true: as Rippin says, modernity poses a challenge to traditional religions generally. Their “responses to modernity” represent various coping strategies. In the case of modern Islam, certain patterns emerge that the following typology attempts for capture.

(1) *Radical Islamism*: Think of Islamist terrorists, principally al-Qaeda and its affiliates, like the Taliban. Jemaah Islamiyah (responsible for the Bali bombings of 2002), represents al-Qaeda’s Southeastern Asian affiliate, not to mention the Moro Islamic Liberation Force. Among radical Islamists today, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Ayman al-Zawahiri are the most notorious. Also think of “Islamic fundamentalism.” These terms are roughly equivalent. “Revolutionary radical Islamism,” states Andrew Rippin, is “that fringe element which dominates the media picture of Islamic fundamentalism.”<sup>33</sup> Radical Islamists are as peripheral as they are self-canonizing. They do not represent mainstream Islam. Yet their influence outstrips their relative numbers. As Gabriel Weimann, professor of communication at the University of Haifa, Israel, has shown in his book, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges*, some 4,800 terrorist websites, forums, and chat rooms operate on the Internet today.<sup>34</sup>

“Radicals believe that selectively literalist interpretations of Islamic doctrine should play a crucial role in both the personal and collective spheres as an all-encompassing framework for life,” Ingram observes. “For radicals, Islam as a framework for life is incompatible with any secular ideology.”<sup>35</sup> The radical Islamist goal is to establish *shari’*a-ruled states—by force, if necessary. The means justifies the end in this holy quest to reassert the Islamic law code, or *shari’*a, in order to bring about an Islamic theocracy.

Iranian support for radical Islamists is well-known. Besides Iranian funding of the Hesbollah, Iran’s backing of the Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr is a known fact, despite Iran’s denials to the contrary. During a June 2003 visit



to Iran, for instance, al-Sadr met with Expediency Council Chairman Ayatollah 'Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. During a January 2006 visit to Iran, al-Sadr met with Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki and Supreme National Security Council secretary, Ali Larijani.<sup>36</sup>

"Also notable is the tendency to view things as opposing spheres," Rippin further explains, "for example, the Government of God versus the Great Satan in Iranian propaganda."<sup>37</sup> Thus, "the Great Satan" myth of America properly belongs to radical Islamist discourse. The implication here is that the other Islamic responses to modernity are not as inclined—or may even be disinclined—to refer to America as the Great Satan.

(2) *Traditionalism*: Traditionalists are known as "the People of the Way of the Prophet and the Community [of Muslims]" (*Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama'a*). Think of the orthodox *ulama* (Muslim clerics). Their goal is to preserve the *status quo*, as Rippin points out:

The Traditionalist group contains within it many of the learned scholars ("ulama") who might be thought to have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, . . . and the vast majority of those who have not been exposed to modern education and thus to a great extent have not experienced the challenge of modernity to such a degree as to consider it a personal problem.<sup>38</sup>

Traditionalist Muslims believe that whatever does not conform to the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad is, by definition, false. Moreover, the Islamic precepts and praxis, as defined by the consensus of the early generations of Muslim scholars, is binding for all Muslims. The Qur'an and Tradition (*hadith*), moreover, cannot be challenged by rational reasoning. All Islamic laws are fixed and immutable.<sup>39</sup> Traditionalists may or may not sympathize with the radical Islamist view of America as the Great Satan, but they tend not to be vocal about it.

(3) *Neo-Traditionalism*: Neo-Traditionalists are conservative Muslims that can tolerate gradual change, while conserving the essentials of traditional Islam. Thus, they can accept the new with the old, but to a very limited degree. "One trend within Traditionalism can be termed 'Neo-traditionalism'," Rippin writes. "This is a tendency which has been seen as a transitional position from Traditionalism to any of the other groups."<sup>40</sup> "It may be, however, that as a position it has its own inherent permanent protagonists," Rippin adds. "Such a position . . . urges a gradual change, seeing the advantage in certain elements of modern technology, for example, but wanting to withstand the rush of the acceptance of it all."<sup>41</sup>

(4) *Modernism*: Modernist Muslims see the need to adapt Islam to modernity, but not to alter Islam's basic character. Modernists allow for greater change than do Neo-traditionalists. "Islamic modernism wants Islam to be the basis for political life as well as the religious," Rippin explains, "but it perceives a need to reinterpret those structures in the light of contemporary

needs, frequently with a clear and unapologetic adoption of Western notions."<sup>42</sup> This Islamic response to modernity sees itself as positive and progressive. Just as the rest of the modern world has been undergoing profound change, so also must Islam. Islam must keep pace with the social and scientific revolutions that have come to define modernity. This does not, however, entail a rejection of Islam, but simply an adaptation—a measured readjustment of it: “In formal contrast to secularism, Islamic modernism insists that Islam does provide an adequate ideological base for public life,” writes Shepard.<sup>43</sup> Ingram usefully adds that

modernists are defined not only by their belief that Islam does provide an adequate basis for life, but that it is also compatible with secular ideological perspectives. For example, modernists will characteristically claim that Islamic principles are compatible with secular philosophies of democracy and capitalism.<sup>44</sup>

Such proponents of Islamic modernism as Jamál al-Dín al-Afghání (1839–97), Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905), and Rashíd Ridá (1865–1935) in Egypt, and Sayyid Ahmad Khán (1817–1898) and Muhammad Iqbál (1876–1938) in India, were part of a movement that “displayed an affinity with the Enlightenment, daring criticisms of the orthodoxy, re-examinations of Islamic theology and its normative rules of conduct in light of the prevailing scientific standards, and an orientation towards social reforms and political moderation.”<sup>45</sup> Islamic modernists are perhaps the most effective bulwark against radical Islamists. As Bernard Lewis commented over a decade before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, the hope is that moderate Islamic values will, over time, discredit the radical Islamist agenda: “The movement nowadays called fundamentalism is not the only Islamic tradition. There are others, more tolerant, more open, that helped to inspire the great achievements of Islamic civilization in the past, and we may hope that these other traditions will in time prevail.”<sup>46</sup> The tendency of Islamic Modernists is not to demonize America as the Great Satan, even though they may still be very critical of America’s support for Israel when the Palestinian question continues to be unresolved and the Palestinian people continue to suffer as a consequence. “Modernism, then, differs from secularism by the efforts it makes to find support in the Qur’an and the *sunna*,” Rippin observes. “From the critic’s point of view, this method is only ‘a cover for what secularists do more openly’.”<sup>47</sup>

(5) *Secularism*: Think of the Republic of Turkey. As Rippin implied, secularists in Turkey did openly what some modernists might only contemplate or do covertly. Ingram provides this simple definition: “Secularists believe that there should be a separation between the realm of religion and politics. In other words, Islam should not act as a framework for shaping the political sphere. For secularists the role of Islam should remain purely personal.”<sup>48</sup> The Republic of Turkey, in its current bid to become a member of

the European Union, would never dare to call America “the Great Satan.” With its secular values, Turkey would never be so inclined, anyway, as Turkey and the United States have far more in common than whatever might be a source of contention.

(6) *Postmodernism*: Think of radical Islamic feminism and Marxism. “Postmodernism entails confrontation with the social issues of the day,” Rippin states, “here conceived within a religious framework: feminism, peace and war, minority expressions of theology, political stances, economics and so forth.”<sup>49</sup> To the extent that a Muslim views reality from any of these frameworks apart from Islam, and does not accept an Islamic worldview as primary, such a Muslim may be characterized as postmodernist. Admittedly, this is a controversial category. Although this might seem to be an oxymoron, a Muslim with a Marxist orientation would be a postmodernist Muslim, by this definition. The term “the Great Satan” would therefore have no real meaning.

(7) *Post-Islamism*: Think of the Baha’i Faith. Just as America is the great ideological “other” from the perspective of radical Islamism, the Baha’i Faith represents the great religious “other” from the perspective of orthodox Islam, which classically views itself as the last “revealed” religion. This is primarily because, as the “daughter religion of Islam,” the Baha’i Faith is post-Islamic: “The Baha’i Faith has been described as a derivative (‘secondary’) monotheism in the sense that it is the daughter religion of Islam.”<sup>50</sup> The religious precursor to the Baha’i Faith was the Bábí religion, which had already effected a clear break from Islam. The Baha’i Faith is now the youngest independent world religion.

The great flaw in most instances of religious nationalism is its tendency to exclude and alienate others: “The exclusionary nature of religious nationalism often leads to violent conflict between religious groups,” comments Barbara-Ann J. Rieffer. “Often, in the development of the religious national identity, an ‘alien other’ is created or identified.”<sup>51</sup> Nowhere has this been truer than in the case of the Baha’is of Iran, who have been systematically stigmatized and persecuted in their objectified role as the excluded “other.” (The Baha’is will be discussed in Chapter 12, *infra*.) The case of the Baha’is has lent considerable weight to Rieffer’s theory “that religious nationalism frequently leads to discrimination, violence, human rights violations and intolerant polities.”<sup>52</sup> Iranian religious nationalism tends to exclude American Muslims as well.

These diverse Islamic orientations have generated a discursive pluralism in the contemporary Muslim world. Today, the Islamic world lacks a central authority. It was Kemal Ataturk who, in 1924, abolished the Caliphate, which, for centuries, had operated as the supreme authority of Sunni Islam. This is why there is no such thing as “the” Islamic myth of America. Even so, while no definitive Islamic myth of America exists, what persists is the radical Islamist myth of America as the Great Satan. Although the sevenfold typology of Muslim responses to modernity, outlined above, is a scholarly

framework of analysis, it immediately demonstrates to the reader that there is a spectrum of perspectives within the contemporary Muslim world. The myth of America as the Great Satan is to be primarily located in the Radical Islamist group.

There are disquieting indications that this demonization of the United States will not go away soon. So long as the roots of the problem remain, the Great Satan myth will endure. In 2006, for instance, former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad launched his own weblog, [www.ahmadinejad.ir](http://www.ahmadinejad.ir). There, in the course of criticizing America, he spoke of the “Great Satan USA.”<sup>53</sup> A visit to that site and a quick search verify the BBC report. In his post of August 8, 2006, Ahmadinejad writes:

Although, right at the beginning of the movement of Imam Khomeini, the type of Government Imam was seeking to establish was known to everybody, however, Imam repeatedly laid great emphasis that everyone’s opinion should be taken into consideration (by holding a referendum) for the establishment of the type of new government in Iran. . . . This action of Imam and vehement participation and positive reply to the establishment of Islamic Republic by the Iranian nation, caused disappointment of some of the political groups that were affiliated to great world powers. . . . Although these terrorist groups are still under the protection and shameful support of Great Satan USA, however, the slap that these groups have received from the brave nation of Iran will never be forgotten by them.<sup>54</sup>

Evidently, President Ahmadinejad was careful to avoid that inflammatory rhetoric in his subsequent blogs.

There is hope for the Great Satan—maybe. In 1993, the incumbent president of Iran was Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. When asked, “Should the situation vis-a-vis the U.S. improve, will the descriptive ‘Great Satan’ disappear?” Rafsanjani replied: “If the U.S. does good, then it cannot be considered to be Satan.”<sup>55</sup> But then, in 2005, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad predicted that Britain, Israel, and the United States would, in time, vanish from the face of the earth, like the Egyptian pharaonic kings: “The oppressive powers will disappear while the Iranian people will stay. Any power that is close to God will survive while the powers who are far from God will disappear like the pharaohs.” To which he added, for emphasis: “It is a divine promise.”<sup>56</sup>

Other Iranian leaders, bent on maintaining some semblance of productive diplomacy with the United States, try to press a distinction between American foreign policy and the American people. When, in 2006, *Time* magazine asked Iran’s former president, Mohammad Khatami, “This is your first visit to Washington. What do you think of the country that has been called the Great Satan?”, Khatami’s response was “I never say ‘Great Satan.’ But I get really upset when Iran is called part of the ‘Axis of Evil.’ Even [Ayatollah]

Khomeini [who coined the phrase] was referring only to U.S. policies—not to the American people or America itself, which is a great and big country.”<sup>57</sup> Khatami is not the only one to get upset by Iran being branded as part of the “Axis of Evil”—a slur that may be analyzed, partly, as America’s response to the Radical Islamist myth of America as the Great Satan.

## The “Axis of Evil” Counter-Myth

This process of demonization is reciprocal in that it engenders a reactionary discourse. On January 29, 2002, President George W. Bush delivered his “State of the Union Address.” The most poignant moment in that speech is when Bush named Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the “Axis of Evil”: “States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an Axis of Evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.”<sup>58</sup> One observer notes: “‘Axis’ evokes ‘our’ enemies of the Second World War, and it is a metonymy for Nazism and fascism.”<sup>59</sup> The original Axis was between Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy—such that Germany and Italy became “the Axis Powers”—with Japan added later on.<sup>60</sup> This rhetoric may be a faint echo of Ronald Reagan’s formulation of “Evil Empire” to demonize the Soviet Union.<sup>61</sup> This signature phrase—this demonization by the world’s champion of freedom, America—is a stigmatization that attaches as much to the citizens of the country from which it originated (the United States) as to the citizens of the country at which it is targeted (Iran, as well as Iraq and North Korea). It is interesting to note that “Axis of Evil” was not President Bush’s creation alone. It was, as it were, the product of the team effort, as explained by the following:

The phrase itself was constructed by David Frum, a White House speech writer, who came up with “axis of hatred” to describe the linkage between Iraq and terrorism. Frum’s boss, Michael Gerson, a self-described evangelical Christian, changed the phrase to “Axis of Evil” to make it sound “more sinister, even wicked.” Later Condoleezza Rice, President Bush’s National Security Advisor, and Stephen Hadley, Deputy National Security Advisor, suggested adding North Korea and Iran as part of the axis. Hadley had second thoughts about adding Iran, because it had a democratically elected president, but Bush liked the idea of including Iran. “No, the president said, “I want it in.” . . .

In the end, President Bush’s senior advisors thought that the “Axis of Evil” was a signature phrase, “a declaration . . . that the country now would have a great mission. It was big, new, and different.” Although some doubted whether it would make sense to link the three countries, the metaphor was regarded by the President’s advisors as a “watershed” that would define the problem in “graphic, biblical terms without publicly committing to a particular solution.”<sup>62</sup>

Thus, it will come as some surprise to many Americans that it was actually Condoleezza Rice who first suggested adding Iran to the “Axis of Evil” phrase. One would hardly have expected a former provost of Stanford University to have offered such a suggestion, which is quintessentially at odds with the canons of academic discourse. The point here is neither to criticize President Bush or Condoleezza Rice, but rather to focus on the “Axis of Evil” rhetoric and its social impact. The reader should also know that the present writer disclaims any intent here to implicate partisan politics, much less to take a partisan stance. Rather, later in this chapter, the writer will look at efforts by the U.S. government to counter its own demonization of Iran in order to demonstrate sympathy, rather than antipathy, towards the religion of Islam in general.

In any event, President Bush’s arrow quickly flew back at the archer. Bush’s demonization of Iran foreclosed any remaining possibilities of productive diplomacy for years to come, and diplomatic relations between the two countries have yet to normalize. The “Axis of Evil” was rhetorically effective, but served only to deepen the gulf that has separated America and Iran and have generally made matters worse. In the three words of that singular metaphor, Bush burned the diplomatic bridge, with the result that Iran’s encounters with the United States (and with the West generally) continue to be conflicted.

What is the effect on American Muslims of the “Axis of Evil” rhetoric? In other words, what is its social impact domestically? In 2001, after pointing out that Iranian anti-Americanism is politically orchestrated, while the populace remains widely enamored of American popular culture, H. E. Chehabi of Boston University observes that negative stereotypes of Iranians persist in American popular thinking:

In America, by contrast, anti-Iranism is not government-sponsored and is more diffuse, as many average Americans see Iranians as somehow genetically programmed to burn the American flag and shout “Death to America”, images indelibly burned into American minds and perceptions by the television pictures of the hostage crisis.<sup>63</sup>

While the type of Islam practiced in Iran is that of the minority “Shi’a” Islam (as opposed to the mainstream “Sunni” Islam), Iran’s institution-ization and expression of Shi’a Islam has come to represent Islam as a whole in the popular imagination of Americans.

The “Axis of Evil” rhetoric may have resonated with some evangelical Christians, who characteristically (with significant exceptions, of course) view the world in such polarities—a world enchanted by principalities of good and evil. That is the “Evil” prong of the metaphor. Religiously speaking, the idea of “evil” tends to cut more deeply. To call someone or to label something as “evil,” in an Iranian context at least, cuts to the quick of religious sensibilities. Arguably, this renders the rhetoric all the more effective,

but sometimes in unexpected or in undesirable ways, as G. Matthew Bonham and Daniel Heradstveit conclude:

The main mistake of this metaphor is that it targets entire countries, not their leaders. It does not differentiate between the evil leaders and the others who live in the country. The reformers, for example, did not want to be viewed as evil, but the metaphor painted them with the same brush of evil. This must be resisted by joining with the conservatives and rallying around the government. In other words, the metaphor mobilized the entire country.<sup>64</sup>

In other words, the “Axis of Evil” metaphor further radicalized Iran, arguably reversing the former gains made by Iranian moderates and reformers, thereby exacerbating destabilization in the region. The future can only tell whether the force of such rhetoric will soon spend its force, or whether it will pave the way for drastic, unilateral measures to come. Bonham and Heradstveit characterize the “Axis of Evil” metaphor as pretextual for legitimizing, *carte blanche*, all policy options: “As a rhetorical device, the ‘Axis of Evil’ exploits both the history of the Second World War (as a metonym for fascism, involving memories of disastrous appeasement) and religious eschatology (with its implication that We are on the side of Good and so can do anything we like).”<sup>65</sup> The difference here is that “the Great Satan” is not a principality, but rather a country, that is, America. Conversely, the reciprocal difference inheres in the fact that the “Axis of Evil,” while targeted at three nations rather than at three principalities, taints Iranians (and, by extension, Muslims generally), as a consequence of Iran’s inclusion as one of the three of adamantine tines of this rhetorical trident. To its credit, however, the U.S. government has gone to great lengths to reverse this unfortunate outcome by reaching out to Muslims.

### **Efforts to Dispel the “Great Satan” Myth and to Minimize the Fallout from the “Axis of Evil” Myth**

Islam is now America’s third-largest religion and, within a decade from now, may surpass the number of American Jews. American Muslims are here to stay, and are part and parcel of the American social fabric. Can the perspectives of American Muslims on America be determined? Ingrid Mattson’s study, “How Muslims Use Islamic Paradigms to Define America,” is suggestive for Islamic myths of America in general: “Muslims need to define not only Islam but also America. Muslims need to place America in its proper theological and legal category so they can determine what kind of relationship is possible and desirable for them to have with this country.”<sup>66</sup> As the Council on American-Islamic Relations observes, “American Muslims have deep appreciation and love for America just as they have empathy and

understanding of the Muslim world.”<sup>67</sup> American Muslims should therefore be seen as an asset to America, and may even, if called upon to do so, play a critical role in diplomatic relations between America and Muslim countries abroad: “Thus American Muslims can serve as the perfect bridge between America and the Muslim world. To enable this aspiration, American policy makers need to constructively engage American Muslims.”<sup>68</sup> Was the U.S. Department of State perhaps deaf to this sage advice? How many American Muslims were not recruited for such diplomatic missions?

The U.S. Department of State has, in fact, experimented with reaching out to Muslims to dispel the myth of America as anti-Muslim and as the Great Satan. On February 14, 2002, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell appeared on MTV. MTV held an international forum, entitled, “Be Heard: An MTV Global Discussion with Colin Powell.” Young people from the United States, India, the Middle East, Italy, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Brazil, and Russia were given the opportunity to ask provocative questions, live via satellite. One forum participant, from a studio in London, asked Powell how he felt “about representing a country commonly perceived as the Satan of contemporary politics.”<sup>69</sup> Secretary Powell replied: “So, far from being the Great Satan, I would say that we are the Great Protector. We have sent men and women from the armed forces of the United States to other parts of the world throughout the past century to put down oppression.”<sup>70</sup>

American public diplomacy, with a large budget from the public treasury, targeted the Middle East and the wider Muslim world beginning in 2002. On October 31, 2002, Charles Dolan, vice-chairman of the bipartisan U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, told the Public Relations Society of America in Washington, D.C., that a wide-scale public relations effort was underway to dispel the Muslim myth of America as the Great Satan through initiating a “dialogue with the press and public” in order “to dispel the negative myth of America as anti-Muslim.”<sup>71</sup> This American outreach to the wider Muslim world was orchestrated by the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), an organization of U.S. international broadcasters. Pursuant to the 1998 Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act (Public Law 105-277), on October 1, 1999, the BBG became the independent federal agency responsible for all federally sponsored, nonmilitary, international broadcasting.<sup>72</sup> The BBG oversees the Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia (RFA), Radio and TV Marti (OCB), and Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN), with the assistance of the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB). This public relations campaign operated under a five-year plan, from 2002 through 2007, at which time the following assessment was made:

Under the 2002–2007 strategic plan, the BBG took significant steps toward this goal. We launched, among many other smaller initiatives, 24/7 broadcasting valued at more than \$100 million annually for Iran (expanded VOA TV and Radio Farda), the Middle East (Al-Hurra TV and



Radio Sawa), and Afghanistan (RFE/RL's Dari and Pashto, then meshed with VOA's Dari and Pashto in a coordinated programming stream), and Pakistan (Aap ki Dunyaa and BTH). These initiatives have gained us some 40 million additional weekly listeners and viewers, boosting the BBG's global audience from 100 to 140 million weekly.<sup>73</sup>

Despite continued jamming by Iranian authorities, Radio Farda is said to be reaching its target audience of younger listeners in Iran. To this day, the campaign continues.

Four years earlier, on February 14, 2004, the BBG launched Al-Hurra (Arabic for "the free one") Television, covering 22 countries in the Middle East via the same satellites used by major indigenous Arabic channels. The official website of Al-Hurra Television is <http://www.alhurra.com>. Another part of America's public relations outreach to the Muslim world is Radio Sawa, a 24/7 network of stations targeting a large segment of the Arabic-speaking population under the age of 35. Radio Sawa went on the air in March 2002. Today, Radio Sawa broadcasts on medium wave to Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan, and on FM in Iraq (Baghdad, Nasiriya, Basra, Mosul, Kirkuk, Sulimaniya, and Erbil), the Palestinian Territories (Ramallah and Jenin), Lebanon (Beirut, North Lebanon, South Lebanon, and Bekaa Valley), Morocco (Rabat, Casablanca, Tangier, Meknes, Marrakesh, Agadir, and Fes), Jordan (Amman and Ajlun), Kuwait (Kuwait City), Bahrain (Manama), Qatar (Doha), U.A.E. (Abu Dhabi and Dubai), and Djibouti.<sup>74</sup> Radio Sawa's website may be accessed at <http://www.radiosawa.com>, with the English version at <http://www.radiosawa.com/english.aspx>.

With the exception of one failed program, called the "Shared Values Initiative," the present writer has not been able to find an independent assessment of the relative effectiveness of this public relations outreach to Muslims abroad. In 2003, Christopher Ross, special coordinator for Public Diplomacy, commented on the challenge that the U.S. government faced: "The gap between who we are and how we wish to be seen, and how we are in fact seen, is frighteningly wide."<sup>75</sup> (This quote is usually attributed to Charlotte Beers, under secretary of state for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, who testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on February 27, 2003.) The United States continues to face this daunting challenge. The American government's intellectual weapons in the war of ideas, entailing considerable U.S. public diplomacy expenditures, may be a valiant battle that, so far, has yet to win any significant victories. Yet public diplomacy continues apace.

The two concepts—"the Great Satan" and the "Axis of Evil"—are symbiotic in that they feed each other. This reinforcing of mutual demonization demonstrates the grim reality that religious symbols play in modern political rhetoric. While the "Axis of Evil" is not of Iran (and, by extension, of Islam) alone, it does show how effectively this demonization of the "other" is part and parcel of the larger religious myth of Islam as played out in

America—that is, Muslims have been, and continue to be, defined by being part of the Axis of Evil. It is the myth that they ineluctably inhabit, even if it is not their own creation. The “Axis of Evil” metaphor had the result, even if unintended, of aggravating Islamophobia within the United States.<sup>76</sup>

The stirring up of this hornet’s nest invites a broader comment regarding the problem of Islamophobia in general. Islamophobia is a neologism for anything and everything anti-Islamic or anti-Muslim. The branding of America as “the Great Satan” and the reciprocal stigmatizing of Iran in particular, and of Islam in general, as the “Axis of Evil” has had a synergizing effect. The two metaphors, in fact, are parasitic.

It is clear that the Great Satan myth of America had a considerable impact on international relations. But what impact did the Great Satan myth have at home? What was the impact of that myth on American Muslims? Imagine: how would it feel to be a Muslim living in America and to be tarred by that same brush? Fachrizal Halim has characterized the impact as the escalation of hatred towards Muslims:

Indeed, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 have pushed Muslims into a more difficult situation, as hatred toward them has intensified. Although the events of the terrorist attacks made a significant change in how non-Muslims differentiate between actual Muslims and those groups which use Islam as a political symbol, the same event has had an unpredictable effect on Muslim communities in America. Muslims in this situation have made the difficult choice to be more mature in this unprecedented situation.<sup>77</sup>

An equally penetrating question is one that has been raised by Americans who are not Muslim: Why was there no outright denial of the Great Satan myth, no distancing from it, no rousing patriotic reaffirmation of American values, no significant social commentary or high-profile editorial by those who speak for American Muslims, as a collective American Muslim response to Khomeini’s evil epithet? Was the relative silence by American Muslims to be understood as tacit acknowledgement that what Khomeini said might have had some appreciable truth to it? The answer is that American Muslim leaders did, in fact, go out of their way to register their loyalty to both Islam and America. One recent example of this is a commentary by Imam Luqman Ahmad, a free-lance writer, a lecturer, an African American Muslim, and an Imam of Masjid Ibrahim Islamic Center, a *masjid* (mosque) in Sacramento, California. In a thought-provoking piece entitled, “Islam American Style,” Sheikh Luqman writes:

Since the tragic events of September 11th, Muslims in America have been expressing their patriotism and Americanism to more varying degrees than in the past. Virtually every Muslim organization and community has not failed to make others aware of or to tout their Americanness. And

rightfully so. . . . We've been told that America is the great Satan. Well I've got news for you. The *Shaitaan* (Devil) is an equal opportunity deceiver; he respects no borders, color, nationality or even religion. Yes, it is true that *Shaitaan* [Satan] is busy in America but he's busy elsewhere as well. Yet, all of the forces of the devil did not stop the *athaan* (Muslim call to prayer) from being called from Sarasota Florida, to Sacramento California. That's America. When the *hijab* [head scarf for Muslim women] was banned in France, Turkey and on Public Television news in Egypt, it still prevailed in America. That alone deserves a hearty "*Allahu Akbar*" (God is Great). The truth is that we as Muslims have decided to make this great nation our home despite her flaws. Obviously our Islam should be first, and we are obligated to practice it, and share it with whoever wants it. Americanism and Islam are not mutually incompatible. The relationship between the two just has to be tweaked a little.<sup>78</sup>

Even though Satan is alive and well, according to Sheikh Luqman, and sinisterly operates in America and abroad, America is not Satan incarnate.

American Muslim communities have generally decried terrorism. While, from their perspectives, American culture may be corrupt and morally bankrupt among large segments of the population, there is much to commend America. The very fact that American Muslims are free to practice Islam in their own way speaks volumes about how America actually protects the religious rights of Muslims in America. These very sentiments are echoed elsewhere. Imam Al-Hajj Talib Abdur-Rashid, prayer leader of the Mosque of the Islamic Brotherhood on the corner of 113th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem, had this to say in a 2005 *Seattle Times* interview: "We who have served in the armies of America as Muslim African-Americans since the American Revolution are not at odds with the West. We are the West."<sup>79</sup>

In fine, the "Great Satan" myth of America was met with the "Axis of Evil" counter-myth tilted at Iran. Both pejorative epithets are roughly equivalent and are functionally comparable. The obvious rhetorical intent is to demonize the other. However productive such discourse may be deemed to be domestically in rallying public opinion behind a given foreign policy, the net effect of the opposing rhetoric is to render any attempt at diplomacy incapable of progress. In finding, in each, a common enemy, all common ground has been forfeited. The rhetoric has a life of its own, independent of any groundswell of support which, in any case, may be expected to diminish over time. These myths, which are powerful when first bruited, are, after all, myths. One observer of U.S.-Iran relations notes that those who demonized America now seek an opportunity for dialogue: "Ironically, the very clerics who demonized the United States now want to gain domestic support by interacting with the former 'Great Satan'."<sup>80</sup> On the part of the United States, the same observer recommends: "We should try to get to a place where we can define Iran not only in terms of its negatives, which are formidable, but also its promise and its potential."<sup>81</sup> In other words, the

Great Satan (America) and the Axis of Evil (here, Iran) would do well to abandon name-calling and engage in dialogue. If and when that happens, the myth of America as the Great Satan will fade into memory, having lost whatever credibility it once may have enjoyed. If and when that happens, the myth of Iran (and Islam) as the third pivot of the Axis of Evil will also recede into historical memory. However, if “the reality” is “that myth is just as important to U.S. policy making as it is to revolutionary Iran,”<sup>82</sup> then the cessation of reciprocal “mything” will not likely occur very soon.

What about the continuing role of the Great Satan myth of America in the wider Islamic world? In “Love and Hate: Anti-Americanism in the Islamic World,”<sup>83</sup> Giacomo Chiozza, post-doctoral fellow in national security, Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, Harvard University, inventoried the perceptions of the United States in the mass publics in eight predominantly Islamic countries—Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates. Based on his statistical survey, Chiozza finds that “ambivalence is a prominent feature of people’s attitude towards America in the Islamic world. The general public *loves* America, when America means democracy, movies, education, people, and science, but *hates* America, when America means foreign policies towards Arab nations, the Palestinians, and Iraq.”<sup>84</sup> While this generalization holds true to a certain extent, “differences still exist” among the eight Islamic countries surveyed, such that “popular opposition to America is greater in Iran and Egypt, and lower in Pakistan, Lebanon, and Indonesia.”<sup>85</sup> The greater opposition to America in Iran comes as no surprise. Its type of antipathy to the United States has been termed, “legacy anti-Americanism,” which “stems from resentment of past wrongs committed by the United States to another society,”<sup>86</sup> combined with “Radical Muslim Anti-Americanism” generally.<sup>87</sup>

As for American Muslim myths and visions of America, within America itself, there is no single, dominant paradigm. However, there is a dynamic relationship between what America does overseas and how America is viewed by Muslims at home in the United States. Ingrid Mattson describes this dynamic relationship between foreign policy and domestic attitudes among American Muslims:

In many cases, those Muslims who begin from a position of “selective embrace” of America move eventually to a position of “full embrace.” When their efforts to effect positive change in society bear fruit, they may come to see advantages in the American political system that they did not see before. At this point, they may abandon former paradigm they used to define America in favor of one is more positive and comprehensive. The shift, however is not inevitable. . . . No matter what happens within America, the deep connections between American Muslims and their brothers and sisters overseas means that American foreign-policy will always have a profound effect on the way Muslims in this country. . . . Perhaps, then, the most powerful paradigm underlying all Muslim definitions America is

the dominant Islamic theological belief in that one's true convictions will inevitably be made manifest by one's actions.<sup>88</sup>

In light of this insight, a new paradigm of Islamic society and culture appears to be developing within America. It may be, of course, too soon to tell. But from all indications, some distinctive patterns are emerging. For instance, second-generation Muslims, generally speaking, are far less inclined to be swayed by anti-Americanism overseas than their parents, whose homeland ties tend to remain perpetual and strong—unless, of course, they themselves were victims of their own home country. The American Muslim community, which is diverse and heterogeneous, is far from monolithic. This means that a comprehensive and coherent domestic position on America, held by the majority of American Muslims, is not yet possible. Over time, with each succeeding generation, a more native and authentic consensus may emerge. At such time as the American Muslim community surpasses, in population, the size of the American Jewish community, one can expect that the voice of American Muslims will begin to be heard, with greater clarity and rhetorical force, in the public sphere. Not only will calls for certain changes in both American foreign and domestic policy be expected, but also calls for change (that is, reform) in the contemporary Muslim world may be raised.

One obvious call for reform, by American Muslim leaders, has already been voiced: viz., that offensive *jihad* is fundamentally un-Islamic (and arguably anti-Islamic). Moreover, that same call may be aimed at Muslim leaders abroad—at the clerical leadership in Iran, for instance—to ensure that Islam, as practiced and as enforced by law, respects the human rights of all citizens. In Iran, the most egregious of such human rights violations have been, and continue to be, experienced by Iran's largest religious minority, the Baha'is, who have suffered persecution in their native country for well over a century and a half.<sup>89</sup> That same American Muslim voice may also demand that the draconian anti-Ahmadi laws in Pakistan be revoked.<sup>90</sup> Expected also may be calls for greater rights for women in Islamicate states.

In other words, from the United States of America, a voice of moderate Islam may emerge that speaks to fellow Muslims across the chasm of West and East, calling for change. That same call for change will also have an American component, as American Muslim leaders take part in consultation on pressing social concerns at home, and, finding common cause with the leaders of other faiths, thereby engendering greater respect for Islamic values, and perhaps even for the Islamic holy book itself, the Qur'an.<sup>91</sup> If and when that sea change takes place, then the myth of "the Great Satan" will become increasingly difficult for Iran, for Radical Islamists generally, and for sympathizers across the Islamic world, to sustain. Reciprocally, if and when the voice and influence of moderates in the Islamic world are ascendant, then Iran (and the ideological transferral to Muslims generally) will no longer be part and parcel of the "Axis of Evil." In time, "the Great Satan" will die a natural death, and the "Axis of Evil" will rust, if not break.



Figure 10.2. American Muslim children at rally supporting Park51 (originally named Cordoba House), a planned Islamic community center in Lower Manhattan, located two blocks from the World Trade Center site, controversially referred to as the “Ground Zero mosque.” Park51’s mission statement affirms, in part:

*Inspired by Islamic values and Muslim heritage, Park51 will weave the Muslim-American identity into the multicultural fabric of the United States.*

(Photo by David Shankbone, August 22, 2010. Permission by Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 license, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/legalcode>. Black & white version of color original.)

## Chapter 10 Update: Defending America, and Islam in America, from Radical Islamism

*I’ve come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles—principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings. . . .*

*So I have known Islam on three continents before coming to the region where it was first revealed. That experience guides my conviction that partnership between America and Islam must be based on what Islam is, not what it isn't. And I consider it part of my responsibility as President of the United States to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam wherever they appear. (Applause.)*

*But that same principle must apply to Muslim perceptions of America. (Applause.) Just as Muslims do not fit a crude stereotype, America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire. The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known.*

—President Barack Obama (2009)<sup>92</sup>

The “Islamic State” is at war with America. Its handbook, “Book of Terror,” is online.<sup>93</sup>

This grave situation creates a duty, and offers an opportunity, to appreciate—and, where necessary, to reassess and redeem—the “partnership between America and Islam” that President Barack Obama spoke of, in the epigraph above.

The rise of the Islamic State (IS, formerly the “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” ISIS, and the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL) in 2013 was both spectacular and sinister. In March 2013, the Islamic State overtook the Syrian city of Raqqa, the first provincial capital to fall under IS control. In January 2014, ISIS took control of the predominantly Sunni city of Fallujah in Iraq. On June 10, 2014, ISIS captured Mosul—a conquest that sent shockwaves around the world. On June 29, 2014, ISIS announced the creation of a caliphate (an Islamic state, with *shari'a* being the rule of law), rebranding its name to the “Islamic State” (IS).

America is siding with moderate Islam against radical Islam. The stakes are high. For one thing, the very definition of Islam is at stake. Islamic terrorism is no longer directed primarily against the West, but is also targeting Muslims (including moderate Sunnis and all Shi'is) who oppose radical Islamists. So, alongside America's long-standing “war on terror,” there is an ideological war. The ideology of jihad (holy war) animates radical Islamists. In the interplay between radical and moderate polarities within the contemporary Muslim world, the sword of rhetoric cuts both ways. Rhetoric is equally sharp in the interface between America and radical Islam. Currently, the more popular term of deprecation used to objectify Americans is no longer “the Great Satan,” but the “Crusaders.”

## Myth: America as “Crusader” Nation

The Islamic State is seen as a direct threat to America's security interests. This threat is not imagined. It is real. In September 2014, the official

spokesman of the Islamic State, Shaykh Abū Muhammad al-ʿAdnānī ash-Shāmī, released a statement that proclaimed: “O America, O allies of America, and O crusaders, know that the matter is more dangerous than you have imagined and greater than you have envisioned.”<sup>94</sup>

The Islamic State’s rhetoric is easily available in a slick, professionally designed propaganda magazine, *Dabiq*, which is available online. In its fourth issue, the cover displays a photoshopped picture of the Islamic State’s black flag atop the Holy See, with the issue title, “The Failed Crusade.” In the feature article, “Reflections on the Final Crusade,” the Islamic State declares that war, in the form of terrorism, is a defensive (and offensive) tactic that “every Muslim” should carry out:

At this point of the crusade against the Islamic State, it is very important that attacks take place in every country that has entered into the alliance against the Islamic State, especially the U.S., UK, France, Australia, and Germany. Rather, the citizens of crusader nations should be targeted wherever they can be found. . . . Every Muslim should get out of his house, find a crusader, and kill him. It is important that the killing becomes attributed to patrons of the Islamic State who have obeyed its leadership. This can easily be done with anonymity. Otherwise, crusader media makes such attacks appear to be random killings.<sup>95</sup>

This “Crusaders” issue of *Dabiq* prominently displays a color photo of the severed head of journalist, Steven Sotloff, who was beheaded on September 2, 2014 in a grisly video posted online that same day. This was effective propaganda in that it immediately got world attention. But its message arguably did not achieve its purpose. Quite the opposite, as the video drew worldwide condemnation. The Islamic State itself admits: “The war against Islam for the sake of *tāghūt* [loosely, infidel leaders] is a media war as well as a military and intelligence struggle.”<sup>96</sup> As part of that media war, *Dabiq* has published a “Message from Steven Sotloff” as well as a piece by another captive journalist, John Cantlie.

Why does the Islamic State refer Americans, and the rest of the West, as “Crusaders” rather than “Satan,” as in America being branded as “the Great Satan” and Israel at this “the Little Satan”? This is because these latter terms were coined, in their contemporary usage, by Ayatollah Khomeini. Therefore, these linguistic coins have currency in Shia rhetoric, not in Sunni discourse.

In its media war, the Islamic State operates on several fronts. *Al-Furqān* glorifies IS’s military victories and showcases its military might. *Al-Itisam*, complementarily, concentrates on sermons, religious activities, and social welfare projects. On November 12, 2014, *al-Furqān* released an audio recording and an accompanying statement that said, in part: “O soldiers of the Islamic State, continue to harvest the soldiers. Erupt volcanoes of *jihād* everywhere. Light the earth with fire against all the *tawāghīt* [infidel leaders], their soldiers, and supporters.”<sup>97</sup>



There is much more that could be written about the Islamic State, as shocking media reports in world news occur almost daily at the time of this writing. As part of the wider Islamic movement to oppose the Islamic State, several Arab states have joined a coalition spearheaded by the United States to attack and degrade the Islamic State militarily and economically. But since there is also a “media war” currently in progress, what may be called a reaffirmation and clarification (if not a redefinition) of Islam is underway.

## Counter Myth: “Islamic State” as the “Order Of Satan”

It’s fair to say that Islamic State’s sudden rise to power precipitated a crisis within the contemporary Muslim world. Profound pressure is put on so-called “moderate” Muslims to decry and condemn the Islamic State as fundamentally un-Islamic—even as “anti-Islamic” in pursuing “offensive” jihad (rather than a limited “defensive” jihad as mandated in the Qur’an). “Offensive” jihad contravenes the basic humanitarian principles inherent in Islam, and tarnishes the reputation of Islam in the eyes of the wider public, thereby contributing to Islamophobia (“fear of Islam”). In other words, “offensive” jihad is an offense to Islam, as well as to the world at large.

Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)—America’s largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization—wrote an op-ed piece for *Time* magazine, categorically condemning the Islamic State as “anti-Islamic”: “The American Muslim community and Muslim scholars around the world have repudiated and rejected ISIS’s twisted ideology, calling it not just un-Islamic, but ‘anti-Islamic’.” Awad goes on to say: “The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the ‘Muslim U.N.,’ said ISIS has “nothing to do with Islam,” and has committed crimes ‘that cannot be tolerated’.”<sup>98</sup>

Public condemnations of the Islamic State are most effectively made by religious leaders who have the authority to make official pronouncements on Islamic matters and concerns. For instance, on Wednesday, September 17, 2014, Sheik Abdul-Aziz al-Sheik, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, and head of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars (a group of 21 Islamic scholars), issued a statement carried on Saudi state media. Signed by all 21 members of the Council, the statement warns that all fatwas (Islamic decrees) or similar opinions that “justify terrorism” are not permissible. Each exhortation to terrorism is “the order of Satan.”<sup>99</sup> The very next day, U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee:

In addition, we have a major effort to undertake to repudiate the insulting distortion of Islam that ISIL is spreading. I was very encouraged to hear yesterday that Saudi Arabia’s top clerical entity, 21 clerics, unanimously came out and declared again that terrorism is a heinous crime

under Sharia law, and more importantly declared that ISIL has nothing to do with Islam and that it is, in fact, the order of Satan. . . . The top—the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia last week said that ISIL is the number one enemy of Islam and it might serve us all well to focus on it not in a name that gives it a state, but to focus on it as the enemy of Islam.<sup>100</sup>

There could, and perhaps should, be a multiplication of such public condemnations, by Muslim leaders, of the Islamic State worldwide. Doubtless there are many. Unfortunately, the media appear not to have given sufficient attention, much less “equal time,” to these corrective pronouncements, which also function as appeals to young Muslims not to be seduced by the hype and “romance” of jihadist propaganda. This crisis intensifies the larger issue of what constitutes good governance within a Muslim society—an issue precipitated by the so-called “Arab Spring.”

## **An American Model of Islam**

As one would expect, there are competing models of Islamic good governance in countries where Muslims constitute majorities. There are also varying models of how minority Muslim communities may best function and prosper within their respective host countries. This is also important since the definition of what it means to be a Muslim, if permitted to further radicalize, can constitute an increasing threat to national security in non-Islamic states. In *God and Logic in Islam: The Caliphate of Reason*, Islamicist John Walbridge proposes that the American experience, where Muslims flourish as a religious minority, may offer an attractive model for the rest of the Muslim world:

Second, I think the Muslims living in the Americas are likely to play a key role in the renewal of the Islamic consensus. Though comparatively small in numbers, they are quickly evolving into a vigorous and successful community. As a minority in an alien cultural setting, they have had to ask themselves new questions about the meaning and nature of Islam. As a minority of very diverse origins, they do not have the luxury of preserving the divisions of the societies they came from. Mosques, whose congregations might come from a score of countries across the Islamic world, have to face issues of diversity, cultural difference, modernism, unity, and the role of women, and to do so while trying to win acceptance from a larger non-Muslim society that usually has not been very sympathetic. Clergy have had to learn to play new roles and to deal with new problems. Muslim communities in American or European cities are microcosms of the Islamic world in a larger international society. I suspect that the lessons they are learning will prove invaluable to the Islamic lands of the Old World.<sup>101</sup>

Walbridge's prediction has promise. Consider this prominent American Muslim: Muqtedar Khan, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Delaware. In "American Exceptionalism and American Muslims" (2012), Dr. Khan ventures to say that American Muslims may have a divine purpose within the greater Muslim world today:

American "Muslim exceptionalists" believe that God brought Muslims to America, the world's richest and most powerful country, for a purpose. They recognize that American Muslims constitute one of the most highly educated, most advanced, and wealthiest Muslim societies in the world. They hope that in America's society, where both freedom of religion and freedom of thought are protected, a genuinely authentic Islamic revivalist and reformist movement will emerge that will not only prove that Islamic principles are truly divine, but that will also establish a path for the Muslim community worldwide to negotiate the challenges of modernity.<sup>102</sup>

An example of particular note is the recent resurgence of interest in the *Maqasid* approach to Islamic law. The basic idea here is to focus on the already-present agreement within the Islamic tradition that all specific Islamic legal rulings must conform with the core purposes of the divine law, and to show that protection of human rights, minority rights, and gender equality falls under the purview of the *Maqasid* (the underlying goals of Islamic law). The idea of the *Maqasid al-Shariah* approach has been revived with great enthusiasm by the International Institute of Islamic thought, an American Muslim research institute based in Virginia.

Dr. Khan goes on to say that American Muslims are developing a new approach to the practice of Islamic law (*Sharia*). Instead of enforcing the centuries-old code to the letter, it makes a lot more sense to identify those "core purposes" that serve as "the underlying goals of Islamic law."<sup>103</sup> These include the "protection of human rights, minority rights, and gender equality."<sup>104</sup> In other words, Islamic law must conform to these objectives. Otherwise, Islamic and practices would be at cross-purposes with Islamic precepts. In this way, Islamic law can be adjusted to the requirements of modernity, without sacrifice to quintessentially Islamic values. This approach is called *Maqasid al-Shariah* ("purposes of Islamic law"), representing the universal principles that serve as a foundation upon which Islamic normative law is based.

Islamic legal thought, historically speaking, has been preoccupied with conformity to the often minutely particular requirements of *sharia* law. This fixation on literalism has come at the expense of a broader understanding of the fundamental purposes served by the practice of Islamic law. By and large, Muslims have tended to conform to those requirements simply as a matter of pious obedience, seen as necessary to an individual Muslim's salvation, since Islamic law, from the Muslim perspective, represents the

way in which God has commanded Muslims, and indeed all people everywhere, to live. But what if strict adherence to Islamic law, while fulfilling the letter of the law, arguably contradicts its purpose under changed historical circumstances? This is precisely the problem—and challenge—posed by “modernity.”

So where does America fit into all of this? The answer is that American Muslims could well involve a model for adapting the requirements of Islamic law to the changed social conditions of today, as a reasonable and coherent “response to modernity.” How would this work? What would this look like?

Dr. Zainab Alwani, Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies at the Howard University School of Divinity, states that American Muslims are part and parcel of American society and therefore should make a positive difference: “As American citizens, Muslims” ideally should be “making substantial contributions to the advancement of American society as a whole.”<sup>105</sup> Professor Alwani has also edited a special issue of *The Muslim World*, published in October 2014. This issue is entitled, *Judaism and Islam in America*. As such, this collection of journal articles is something every publication event, especially in having brought Jewish and Muslim perspectives together in a single forum, thereby creating a dialogue by association. In the present writer’s view, this is nothing short of extraordinary. It would be too narrow to say, “it could only happen in America.” But it did. This could serve as a model for stimulating further interfaith dialogue in America. In her introduction, Professor Alwani writes:

In conclusion, all the articles in this volume shed light on how followers of different faith groups in North America are resorting to their sacred texts in order to address social issues in today’s modern world. In addressing the daunting social challenges confronting the community of all faith groups, perhaps a collective effort by the interreligious community would introduce a new chapter in interfaith relations.<sup>106</sup>

Professor Alwani’s discussion of how a methodology, based on the Qur’anic and other primary sources, can best address contemporary social issues and challenges of modernity. The author presents the methodology of Dr. Taha Jabir al-Alwani (b. 1935), founder of the legal doctrine of *fiqh al-aqalliyāt* (jurisprudence for Muslim minorities). This involves identifying the moral purposes of Islamic law (*sharī‘a*) as well as the underlying principles of the Qur’an (*al-maqāṣid al-Qur’āniyya*) and then selectively and systematically adapting Islamic practices by applying these principles in the changed historical circumstances of the postmodern world. This involves a fundamental rethinking of the notion of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) itself. Rather than understanding *fiqh* as divine knowledge, rethinking *fiqh* as human understanding allows for Muslim jurists to applying Islamic jurisprudence to circumstances in order to remedy a situation in which

a particular Muslim minority, such as the American Muslim community, may be experiencing social, economic or other difficulties that work to the disadvantage of all concerned. But the discussion is quite technical, and impossible to summarize with any kind of brevity that would do justice to this novel approach. This “ethical turn” in Islamic jurisprudence has been called the “*maqāṣidī* turn.” The goal is to further enhance the positive integration of immigrant Muslims into American society and beyond.

There’s another article in this special issue is more directly focused on the application of Islamic law within the American Muslim experience. The author, Muzammil H. Siddiqi, writes:

#### Islamic Law and Muslims of America

Muslims in America recognize and accept the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence. All these three documents agree with the basic spirit and core values of Islam. [The] U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of religion.

According to [the] U.S. Constitution, and general laws, Muslims are not forbidden to do what is obligatory according to the Shari’ah and also not forced to do what is forbidden in Shari’ah. There are certain things allowed according to American laws which are forbidden in Islam such as drinking alcohol or eating pork. There are also certain things forbidden here which are permissible in Islam such as having more than one wife (with some rules and restrictions). Some of the Federal, State and local laws come in the category of ‘*mubah*’ or ‘*halal*’ i.e. it is allowed for Muslims to follow those laws. Muslims abide by all civil codes and there is no question that they should be followed.

It is the personal laws of Islam, such as marriage, divorce and inheritance that are not fully recognized in America. Muslims, however, try to adopt or adapt them.<sup>107</sup>

Without digressing, these discussions do not speak directly to an Islamic “theology of America,” since, as previously stated in this chapter, contemporary Islam does not appear to have specific views on this particular question. That is not to say that there is not a vigorous discussion of American foreign policy. There is, of course, and this often takes on the contours of a debate, if not a wholesale critique of American interventions in the Middle East and elsewhere. Such discussions, moreover, may be specific to particular countries and contexts.

What is becoming clear, however, is that Muslim communities within America have the opportunity to offer a fresh model as to what it means to be a Muslim minority within a democracy. If consensus can be developed around these issues, then perhaps the American Muslim community can then serve as a model for the rest of the Muslim world. But one thing is for sure: such a model would go far toward solving the so-called “clash of civilizations” between the Muslim world and the West.

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*Figure 11.1.* SGI-USA Headquarters building in Santa Monica, CA. Its declared mission, in part, is to “promote activities based on peace, culture, education and art,” hosting events on such topics as “human rights, non-violence, relationships and self-transformation.” These programs are “generally open to the public at no cost, and often include guest lecturers, and various programs for youth.” See <http://www.sgi-usa.org>. Accessed January 15, 2015. (Photo courtesy of Soka Gakkai International USA. Photo credit: Gerry Hall.)

## Chapter 11

# Buddhist Myths and Visions of America

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*So in this respect, our entire humanity has a responsibility, particularly this nation. Among others, you have economic power, but the most important thing you have is the opportunity to utilize your human creativity. This is something very good. Therefore, I think America has the potential to make this world straight. . . . I think this nation is the only superpower. Therefore, I think you have the opportunity or ability to change it.*

—Dalai Lama (1991)<sup>1</sup>

At once ancient and modern, the “Lotus” of Buddhism has been transplanted in America.

The Lotus Blossom is one of the most visible symbols of Buddhism today. A symbol of purity, the lotus flower arises from mud in a swamp. The sacred image of this water lily has now taken root in America. In scholarly discourse, a religion is “transplanted” when it is established abroad, across cultural divides, beyond its country of origin. In America, as elsewhere, Buddhism is a transplanted religion. Although Buddhism offers a universal message, a wide array of Buddhist sects teach that message in different ways. Therefore Buddhism is not a single lotus blossom of enlightenment teachings, but a garden of lotuses of varying hues. Two Buddhist groups, Tibetan Buddhism and Soka Gakkai International (“SGI”/“Soka Gakkai”), have spoken to Americans about America’s world role, from the perspective of enlightenment. While SGI is “missionary” in the more traditional sense—of actively seeking converts—Tibetan Buddhism is “missionary” in the promotion of its positive ideals across religious boundaries. The Dalai Lama, now “informal head of Tibetan Buddhists and formal head of the Tibetan government in exile”<sup>2</sup> tells “those who are not Buddhists not to convert to Buddhism.”<sup>3</sup>

The first of the Buddhist myths and visions of America to be examined is Soka Gakkai’s myth and vision of the “Second American Renaissance,”

followed by the Tibetan Buddhist perspective of Robert Thurman—the first American to be ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist monk—and his myth and vision of America’s “Second Renaissance.” Finally, the Dalai Lama’s “Buddhist democracy” myth and his vision of America’s world role will be presented. The Dalai Lama—one should hasten to add—may well be the world’s most influential spiritual teacher today, next to the current leader of the Catholic church, Pope Benedict XVI. The significance of SGI inheres in the fact that this Buddhist movement has reportedly attracted a greater diversity of race and class than any other Buddhist organization in America.<sup>4</sup>

### Soka Gakkai’s Myth of “America’s Second Renaissance”

America’s world role is seen as a specifically Buddhist mission in the Japanese sect of Soka Gakkai, which has spread to the United States and has achieved a certain measure of popularity. Soka Gakkai (“Value Creation Society”) equates faith with spiritual and material benefits (or “inconspicuous and conspicuous benefits”) that derive from such faith. SGI has more than 12 million adherents in more than 190 countries and territories worldwide. Probably one of the most well-known practitioners of Soka Gakkai is actor Orlando Bloom, of *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Lord of the Rings* fame. Vocalist Tina Turner is also a practitioner, as are jazz artists Herbie Hancock (1987 Academy Award for Best Music, Original Score) and Wayne Shorter, both multiple Grammy Award winners. Both individually and communally, SGI Buddhists chant *Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* before the *Gohonzon*, which is a mandala ascribed to Nichiren (1222–1282), “a fiery prophet who insisted that the *Lotus Sutra*, one of the great Mahayana texts, is the supreme expression of the Buddha’s teaching and the one and only version of Buddhism for our day.”<sup>5</sup> This is the core practice of SGI. Faith in the efficacy of chanting *Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* is at the heart of a movement that promises the world and enlightenment as well, if the practitioner has the requisite faith.

Antonio Gualtieri, senior colleague of the present writer when teaching in the Department of Religion at Carleton University in Ottawa (1994–1996), argued that the original teachings of Jesus and the Buddha were too difficult for their followers to practice.<sup>6</sup> In examining “the discrepancies between the spiritual and moral demands of the founders of great religious traditions and the actual outlook and practice of their followers,”<sup>7</sup> and in raising the question: “Why do the rigorous soteriological and moral messages of the Buddha and the Christ continue within their respective traditions if they embody a way of life to which the vast majority of their communities do not subscribe?”<sup>8</sup> Antonio Gualtieri found that Buddhists and Christians (whom Gualtieri characterizes as “apostates” in deviating from the strict moral and mental demands of the Buddha and Christ) were “reading and hearing the founders’ teachings differently than they intended.”<sup>9</sup> This accommodating process, where rigors of the Noble Eightfold Path

prescribed by the historical Buddha are satisfied by the substitute of faith and devotional practice, is perfectly exemplified by Soka Gakkai. Yet, with “earnest resolve,” SGI Buddhists chant in order to reveal the innate Buddhahood each human being may potentially realize.

In America, SGI Buddhists formerly chanted for worldly desires but are now chanting for world peace. In the 1970s, SGI practitioners had the reputation of being self-centered and materialistic. At Buddhist meetings—several of which the present writer had attended—adherents would give personal testimonies as to how chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* would gain for them the wine, sex, and money they were seeking. However, Daisaku Ikeda—as third president of the Soka Gakkai and founder of the Soka Gakkai International—has transformed the materialistic promises of SGI practices into social premises that all can respect. Ikeda has almost single-handedly matured SGI. Among SGI’s stated “Purposes and Principles” today is “the ideal of global citizenship” with its concomitant adjuncts of “fundamental human rights” and “freedom of religion and religious expression” and eschews any and all discrimination. Global prosperity, respect for education (and the “development of scholarship”), and environmentalism are among its noble goals. These sacralized secular values are characteristic of progressive internationalism. They also resonate with American values.

In his small volume of poems, *Songs for America*,<sup>10</sup> which are essentially directed to his Buddhist followers in the form of personal meditations in free verse form, Ikeda reveals a deep admiration for America in his vision of America’s role in the spiritual transformation of the world. In so doing, President Ikeda echoes and amplifies the perspectives of his predecessors—presidents Makiguchi and Toda—on America’s potential for the spread of Buddhism and its expected influence in bringing about world peace. Ikeda notes that, in early years of the twentieth century, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, founder of Soka Gakkai,

saw in America  
the land where future civilizations  
would encounter and unite.

This vaticinary vision of America, while not a Buddhist tenet, paved the way and justified an intense missionary effort to spread Soka Gakkai’s message to America. In the same vein, Ikeda further remarks that Josei Toda, Makiguchi’s successor,

often recalled that it was  
America that brought  
freedom of religion to post-war Japan,  
opening the way  
for a peace movement based  
on this Buddhism to unfold.<sup>11</sup>

Here, “this” Buddhist peace movement obviously refers to Soka Gakkai. Once SGI to the United States, it is only natural that further reflections on America’s world role would emerge out of the visions of SGI’s founding presidents.

President Ikeda, in Whitman-esque fashion, praises America as a “republic of ideals” in which freedom and equality have served as “uniting principles.”<sup>12</sup> Here, Ikeda celebrates the cosmopolitan social fabric of America, which is a demographic microcosm of the world. Despite Ikeda’s high regard for America’s ideals, a disparity exists between America’s noble professions of freedom and equality and its sobering social reality. A prime example of this dissonance between the ideal and the real is the sociomoral disease of racism, in which “the soul of your idealism” is in peril. America’s idealism is in jeopardy, and “grieves at the stark realities of racial strife.”<sup>13</sup>

Here, America is not alone. Ikeda strikes a warning note in saying that the world is now in serious trouble. It is sick and “ailing.” Pathologically, America is

about to succumb  
to the same illness.<sup>14</sup>

Sickness requires a cure, and the panacea inheres in the spread of those palliative ideals and practices that SGI Buddhism incarnates. America is in an ideal position to promote those socially curative precepts and practices. This is precisely what attracted SGI leaders to the prospects and promises of America as a Buddhist mission field.

As the grand social experiment that it is, American society should be imbued “with the love of humanity.”<sup>15</sup> There are signs that this is already happening, as Ikeda sees it:

This rich spiritual soil,  
this great earth alive with the diversity  
of peoples and traditions—  
giving rise to a new culture,  
a new humanity.<sup>16</sup>

By implication, what America achieves at home should be promoted abroad. America’s mission, therefore, is to export and internationalize its internal values of freedom and respect for human rights, which vast sectors of the planet sadly lack.

With this global mission comes America’s destiny in that this “multiracial nation, America” holds such great promise that it “represents humanity’s future.” America “holds secret stores” of “unbounded possibility.” The engine of this social transformation is powered by

transforming  
the energy of different cultures



into the unity of construction” and converting “the flames of conflict into the light of solidarity.<sup>17</sup>

Just how is this going to happen, the reader may well ask? How will this transformation occur? With what engines of social change will America become an exemplary social order for the rest of the world to admire and emulate?

Domestic peace can promote world peace. Ikeda recognizes that, for America to gain the moral authenticity and authority it needs to fulfill its potential for catalyzing world peace, it should do everything in its power to harmonize its own society. America is a land that can potentially unite nations since America itself is “a miniature of the entire world.” Ikeda sees “unity and solidarity” of America’s diversity to be the “principle and formula” for “global peace.”<sup>18</sup> The Buddhist leader calls this social awakening a social renewal: “Our goal—the Second American Renaissance” in which American society will “advance” from conflict, divisiveness, and hatred to “union,” “coexistence,” and “fraternity.”<sup>19</sup> Without saying so explicitly, Ikeda clearly has his audience in view in speaking of “our goal”—which is the goal of Buddhists in exerting their leavening influence in helping America realize its own high ideals. Ikeda envisions America as “the protagonist and producer” of the “drama of world history.” America’s “powerful vigor” will determine the “destiny of our precious oasis”—that is, “Our spaceship Earth.”<sup>20</sup> What Ikeda says in poetry is more explicitly spelled out in prose.

In *My Dear Friends in America* (2001),<sup>21</sup> Ikeda states that progress in America contributes to progress abroad directly and exponentially: “The advance of America is the advance of the world. An inch of growth for America is an inch of growth for the rest of the world. I am convinced that, in the future, America will of necessity become the central stage for the SGI movement.”<sup>22</sup> Given the extraordinary magnitude of America’s influence, the Buddhist community within America has its own special mission, which is to promote what SGI characterizes as its “new humanism”:

Today, too, the renewal of the United States is linked to the renewal of the world, and the revitalization of the American people, awakened to a new humanism, must become the basis for the revitalization of the country. The SGI’s movement of human revolution is the most fundamental contribution we can make to the renewal of the United States and the world.<sup>23</sup>

This is an important statement, and certainly reflects the maturity of SGI, which is due, for the most part, to Ikeda’s leadership. The phrase, “human revolution,” is an SGI euphemism for individual (and thus social) transformation.

While SGI sees the United States of America as a potent agent of social change, this special Buddhist vision of America, while clearly and publicly

articulated by its three presidents, has not quite achieved the status of a religious doctrine. Although SGI leaders have made some exceptional statements about America's actual and ideal role in Buddhist terms, lay Buddhists are not particularly focused on their leaders' statements with regard to America's world role in terms of international peace and in the spread of Buddhism. In the SGI-USA *Buddhist Learning Review: 2007 Study Guide*, the words "America" and the "United States"—beyond the copyright page itself—are nowhere mentioned.

Nor does Ikeda's appreciation of America enjoy any status whatsoever as a doctrine. It is a sentiment expressed by Ikeda and often seemingly not entirely shared by the majority of SGI-USA members. This is a case where the leader speaks, the practitioners listen with respect, yet no real doctrinal or programmatic development flows from the leader's presentiments in this regard. SGI's vision of America is a vehicle of socially progressive ideals that, if translated in social reality within the SGI community and without, will no doubt contribute to the advancement of its Buddhist vision, with its message and modality of personal and communal empowerment.

Notwithstanding the fact that *Songs for America* is available to all Soka Gakkai adherents, there appears to be no universally held religious appreciation of America among its grassroots practitioners. There may be wisdom in this, since SGI has adherents in more than 190 other countries and territories. A universal outreach can scarcely afford to be compromised by too great a focus on one single country, even if it is the world's only superpower. Moreover, the kind of enthusiasm that Ikeda expresses in *Songs for America* can be found elsewhere, as he praises other places and other peoples. Such effusion is part of his style. President Ikeda's *Songs for America*, therefore, is an unfinished symphony.

## **Robert Thurman's Myth of America's "Second Renaissance"**

One of the foremost popularizers of Buddhism in America today is Robert Thurman. Like actor Richard Gere, Robert Thurman is something of a national celebrity when it comes to Buddhism. After the traumatic loss of an eye while at Harvard, in 1961 Thurman embarked on a spiritual quest that took him to Turkey, Iran, and India. Prior to this, Thurman's first wife, Christophe de Menil, divorced him as she did not want to travel to India with Thurman to seek enlightenment. In India, Thurman met and befriended the Dalai Lama in 1962, and became his steadfast disciple. In 1964, the Dalai Lama ordained Thurman as a Tibetan Buddhist monk, marking him with the distinction of being the first Westerner ever to do so. Several years later, Thurman returned to America. He exchanged his Buddhist robes for those

of a professor, and promulgated his newfound knowledge, particularly as a “Dharmic” writer. He remarried and had five children, including Uma Thurman, who went on to become a famous Hollywood actress. In 1997, Thurman was named one of *Time* magazine’s 25 most influential persons of that year. Today, Thurman is the Jey Tsong Khapa Professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, is co-founder (with Richard Gere) and president (of the board of trustees) of Tibet House U.S., and is also president of the American Institute of Buddhist Studies. As a scholar, Thurman has translated major Buddhist treatises from the Tibetan *Tanjur*. (In the Tibetan Buddhist canon, the *Kanjur* is the collection of discourses of the Buddha, and the *Tanjur* is the collection of 225 books of commentary on the Buddha’s teachings.)

In 1998, Thurman published his Buddhist manifesto, *Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Real Happiness*,<sup>24</sup> with a foreword by the Dalai Lama himself. The title’s resonance with the Declaration of Independence shows that Thurman was writing to an American audience. In *Inner Revolution*, Thurman argues that America is uniquely poised to realize Buddhist values of individual enlightenment and social harmony. Thurman describes how the ideals of America’s Founding Fathers—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—and the founding principles of American democracy—equality, individual rights, due process, and economic well-being—resonate with the Buddha’s teachings, endowing America with the potential to become the next great civilization: “To finish building the free society dreamed of by Washington, Franklin and Jefferson, we must draw upon the resources of the enlightened imagination, which can be systematically developed by the spiritual sciences of India and Tibet.”<sup>25</sup>

Thurman’s concept of an “inner revolution” is a psychosocial transformation that individuals and societies achieve when they seek and practice enlightenment, which includes what is described as a quasi-scientific “elucidation of causation.” This “inner revolution” comes about through a profound insight into the nature of reality, of the cause of and cure for human suffering, and a resolved compassion for all suffering beings—for wisdom and compassion.

At the end of *Inner Revolution*, Thurman offers ten planks for a political platform based on enlightenment ideals and 30 axioms for a politics of enlightenment. In brief, they are, in brief, as follows:

*First*: “Democracy’s quintessential universalism must be re-revoked as an ideal goal for the entire planet.”<sup>26</sup>

*Second*: “Acknowledging the very grave injustices there still inflicted on billions of beings, we proclaim everyone’s right to equality of opportunity in all respects, regardless of racial, sexual, religious, national, ethnic, or economic group membership.”<sup>27</sup>

*Third:* “We pledge to adopt a fully consensual tax system that will allow individual taxpayers to earmark their contributions for programs they choose.”<sup>28</sup> “We should increase the graduated income tax.”<sup>29</sup>

*Fourth:* “We deplore capital punishment and resolve to eradicate it in our *aspiring-to-be-civilized* society.”<sup>30</sup>

*Fifth:* “We affirm each woman’s right to choose for herself whether she will offer residence in her body to a new life, and therefore we pledge to deploy all forms of sex education and contraception to give women maximum control.”<sup>31</sup>

*Sixth:* “We affirm each individual’s right to freedom of choice of lifestyles and medical therapies, free conscience in matters of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of sexual preference—as long as these freedoms are not harmful to others.”<sup>32</sup>

*Seventh:* “Aware of our complicity in a catastrophic mis-direction of efforts and resources over this last century of militarism, we pledge to cut our defense budgets by two-thirds, reappropriating \$200 billion a year in America alone and . . . to build enlightened, disarmed democracies” in Tibet and elsewhere.<sup>33</sup>

*Eighth:* “We pledge to make lifelong education for all citizens the nation’s top priority.”<sup>34</sup>

*Ninth:* “We reaffirm the enlightenment principle of altruistic support for all, implementing rights to a job, education, shelter, sustenance, a healthy environment, a universal health-care system along Canadian or European lines, which would encompass a competitive plurality of health systems, including Chinese, Tibetan, Indian, and others.”<sup>35</sup>

*Tenth:* “At the heart of our system, and in this hour of its crisis, we affirm the need for strong executive leadership all democracies.”<sup>36</sup>

The reader gets the picture. This is a highly idiosyncratic political platform and does not represent a collective Buddhist vision of America. However, Thurman urges Westerners to adopt five political principles that are said to derive from the spiritual precepts of Tibetan Buddhism: “transcendent individualism, nonviolent pacifism, educational evolutionism, ecosocial altruism, and universal democratism.”<sup>37</sup>

Thurman also advocates a “Second Renaissance,” which is the discovery and application of the advanced “inner science” of ancient Tibetan Buddhist precepts and practices. As the Robert Thurman website represents

these ideas, Thurman is still promoting his enlightenment agenda for noble purposes:

Professor Thurman's scholarly and popular writings focus on the "inner revolution" that individuals and societies successfully negotiate when they achieve enlightenment. He defines this inner revolution as accurate insight into the true nature of reality and determined compassion for the suffering beings. He also works toward what he terms a "Second Renaissance," which he sees currently taking place as Western culture goes beyond the 14th-century European discovery of the natural sciences of the ancient Greeks that catalyzed the "first renaissance" to discover and apply in practice the advanced "inner science" of ancient Indian culture.<sup>38</sup>

In effect, Robert Thurman has offered a "vision quest for the creation of a mandala of an enlightened America,"<sup>39</sup> from his Tibetan Buddhist perspective:

Most of the teachers from various enlightenment movements seem to agree on one thing: If there is to be a renaissance and enlightenment science in our times, it will have to begin in America. . . . The enlightenment movement can bring a full range of identity-analysis tools as well as self-esteem-building disciplines and arts so that Americans can realize individual king- and queenship.<sup>40</sup>

Thurman is hopeful for America's prospects of evolving into an enlightened society, adding that: "There is much to build on in American modernity and American spirit."<sup>41</sup> To be sure, Robert Thurman does not have the authority, as the Dalai Lama certainly does, to promulgate his ten "planks" and five principles for an enlightened America—as official Buddhist doctrine. However, Thurman exercises considerable influence as a popularizer of Tibetan Buddhism in America today. For this, one must credit Thurman with having imparted a Buddhist-inspired mission of an enlightened America, founded on spiritual principles that incarnate compassion for all sentient beings, with justice and opportunity for all people, beginning in America.

## **The Dalai Lama's "Buddhist Democracy" Myth and Vision of America's World Role**

What is a "Dalai Lama"? In Tibetan belief, the Dalai Lamas are manifestations of Avalokitesvara, the Buddha of Compassion, called *Chenrezig* in Tibetan. As enlightened beings who can see the past, present, and future within multiple realms of existence, the Dalai Lamas are uniquely gifted in

the art of good governance. Unlike ordinary beings, the Dalai Lamas can choose where to be reborn. In an unbroken succession over time, the position of the Dalai Lama is passed from incarnation to incarnation to ensure that the same enlightened being remains in power. When a Dalai Lama passes away, a search task force is convened to locate his new reincarnation. Once found, the child is brought to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. That child is then educated within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, steeped in enlightenment ideals, and trained to govern.<sup>42</sup> This tradition was dramatized in the Hollywood film, *Kundun* (1997), directed by Martin Scorsese (1997).

This is what happened with the current Dalai Lama. Born on July 6, 1935, to a peasant family in a small village called Taktser in northeastern Tibet, Lhamo Dhondrub, as the child was named, was, in accordance with Tibetan tradition, recognized at the age of two as the reincarnation of his predecessor the thirteenth Dalai Lama, and thus an incarnation of Avalokitesvara. Lhamo Dhondrub then became His Holiness, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. The new Dalai Lama was enthroned on February 22, 1940, in Lhasa, capital of Tibet.

At the age of six, the young Dalai Lama began his intensive Buddhist education. At 25, he received his Doctorate of Buddhist Philosophy in 1959. After some 80,000 Peoples Liberation Army soldiers invaded and captured Tibet, the Dalai Lama assumed full political power as head of state on November 17, 1950. In 1959, after a massive demonstration demanding that China leave Tibet and recognize Tibet's independence, the "Tibetan National Uprising" was brutally crushed by the Chinese military. Disguised as a soldier, the Dalai Lama escaped, on horseback, to India, where he was granted political asylum. He was followed into exile by some 80,000 Tibetan refugees. Today, more than 120,000 Tibetans are living in exile. Since 1960, the Dalai Lama has resided in Dharamsala, known as "Little Lhasa," seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile.

In 1963, the Dalai Lama drafted and promulgated a proposed constitution for a future Tibet, promulgated on March 10, 1963. The preamble of the constitution, while clearly modeled on the U.S. Constitution, invokes Buddhist principles:

Whereas it is deemed desirable and necessary that the principles of justice, equality and democracy laid down by the Lord Buddha should be reinforced and strengthened in the government of Tibet . . . now, therefore, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been pleased to ordain [this constitution] as follows . . .<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, the Foreword of the Tibetan Constitution states:

This [Constitution] takes into consideration the doctrines enunciated by the Lord Buddha, the spiritual and temporal heritage of Tibet and the

ideas and ideals of the modern world. It is thus intended to secure for the people of Tibet a system of democracy based on justice and equality and ensure their cultural, religious and economic advancement.<sup>44</sup>

To advance the Tibetan cause of independence, the Dalai Lama has fashioned a model constitution that adroitly embodies Buddhist ideals, democratic principles of good governance, and progressive economic reforms. A longtime advocate of democracy, the Dalai Lama, while drafting this constitution, thoughtfully reflected:

Even prior to my departure from Tibet . . . I had come to the conclusion that in the changing circumstances of the modern world the system of governance in Tibet must be so modified and amended as to allow the elected representatives of the people to play a more effective role in guiding and shaping the social and economic policies of the State. I also firmly believed that this could only be done through democratic institutions based on social and economic justice.<sup>45</sup>

With the Dalai Lama represented as head of state, leaders of the National Democratic Party for Tibet, a political party founded by Tibetan exiles in India in 1994, have commented on its uniqueness: "Tibetan democracy is unique in many ways. Its principal characteristic is that it has been gifted by His Holiness the Dalai Lama himself even at the open reluctance or sheer indifference of the Tibetan public. It is, therefore, immensely sacred and precious."<sup>46</sup> After his many years of efforts to regain the independence of Tibet, on December 11, 1989, the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.<sup>47</sup> On that memorable day, the Dalai Lama spoke on his proposed "Five Point Peace Plan," entailing a broader understanding of what peace entails:

Peace, in the sense of the absence of war, is of little value to someone who is dying of hunger or cold. It will not remove the pain of torture inflicted on a prisoner of conscience. It does not comfort those who have lost their loved ones in floods caused by senseless deforestation in a neighboring country. Peace can only last where human rights are respected, where the people are fed, and where individuals and nations are free. True peace with one's self and with the world around us can only be achieved through the development of mental peace.<sup>48</sup>

"Mental peace" is where spiritual orientation and discipline come in. Buddhism provides an instrumentality for developing this internal equanimity and composure from which peaceful actions and reactions flow: "Inner peace is the key: If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquillity. In that state of mind you can deal with situations with calmness and reason, while keeping your

inner happiness.”<sup>49</sup> (This connection with Buddhism is only implied, however, as the Dalai Lama’s only reference to Buddhism in this speech was to “Tibet’s historic role as a peaceful Buddhist nation.”) That much may work for inner peace. But what about international peace? As the world’s superpower, what is America’s role in the world today, from the Dalai Lama’s perspective?

The Dalai Lama has made forthright—albeit diplomatically measured—statements about America’s mission and destiny that repay study. Two years after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the Dalai Lama spoke of America’s role in the world today:

So in this respect, our entire humanity has a responsibility, particularly this nation. Among others, you have economic power, but the most important thing you have is the opportunity to utilize your human creativity. This is something very good. Therefore, I think America has the potential to make this world straight. Certain activities or certain atmospheres are unhealthy and seem to be very crooked. I think in order to make them straight and more honest, with more human feeling, this nation has the real potential and the ability to correct those smaller nations trying to change the world, but the existing pattern may face some immediate consequences which they cannot face. I think this nation is the only superpower. Therefore, I think you have the opportunity or ability to change it.<sup>50</sup>

The Dalai Lama’s statement—“America has the potential to make this world straight”—is a clear recognition of America’s world role both economically and spiritually. But there is a political dimension as well. In a 1995 discourse, the Tibetan Buddhist leader stated:

The United States must not underestimate its role in the world today. As Americans you should be proud of your heritage, proud of the values upon which your Constitution is based. Accordingly, you should not shirk from your responsibility to bring those same fundamental rights and freedoms to people living under totalitarian regimes.<sup>51</sup>

While made by a religious leader, neither of these statements is inherently religious. In fact, they are covertly if not overtly political. In speaking of “people living under totalitarian regimes” generally, he surely has in mind the people of Tibet particularly.

The Dalai Lama clearly links democracy and Buddhism, seeing the former in terms of the latter: “While it is true that no system of government is perfect, democracy is the closest to our essential human nature and allows us the greatest opportunity to cultivate a sense of universal responsibility.”<sup>52</sup> This is as overt a Buddhist endorsement of democracy as possible. The Dalai Lama, throughout his discourse, strikes linkages between Buddhist beliefs and democratic concepts, such as First Amendment freedoms



and consensus building. In so doing, the Dalai Lama goes beyond drawing parallels to suggest that bringing a Buddhist influence to bear on democracy would be a good thing: “As a Buddhist, I strongly believe in a humane approach to democracy, an approach that recognizes the importance of the individual without sacrificing a sense of responsibility toward all humanity.”<sup>53</sup>

In conclusion, one finds that Buddhism in America variously sees America either as a mission field for the propagation of Buddhism (Soka Gakkai) or sees America as having the potential for developing an enlightened society (Robert Thurman), which, in turn, will empower America to pursue its world role in furthering universal democracy, human rights, prosperity, education, freedom, and compassion (Dalai Lama), in an enlightened self-interest that can ultimately potentialize the self, through acts of selflessness. What is the Buddhist vision of America in a nutshell?: Through the first principles of Buddhist enlightenment, America can achieve a “Second Renaissance.”



Figure 11.2. SGI-USA Buddhist practitioners chanting “*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*” at grand opening of Atlanta, Georgia SGI-USA Buddhist Center (South Zone) on April 5, 2014. These Buddhists variously chant for peace throughout the world and the happiness of all beings, for personal enlightenment (awakening the Buddha nature within) and for the fulfillment of wishes in the present and future, depending on individual needs and progress along the Buddhist path. Like prayer in theistic traditions, chanting is believed to be effective in optimizing physical and spiritual cause-and-effect forces by means of the “mystic law” of the universe, as taught in the Lotus Sutra. (Photo courtesy of Soka Gakkai International USA. Photo credit: Lucy Estephanos.)

## Chapter 11 Update: America—A Bodhisattva Nation?

Our goal —  
 the Second American Renaissance . . .  
 Grip the rudder,  
 hold firm to your course —  
 the Stars and Stripes,  
 the tricolor flag of the SGI,  
 ripple as a hopeful breeze fills our sails . . .  
 Our destination —  
 America's distant future, . . .  
 the brilliant glory of human harmony.

—Daisaku Ikeda (1993)<sup>54</sup>

Daisaku Ikeda transformed Soka Gakkai's teachings into a gospel of peace.

This was a dramatic transformation from the period of the 1970s, in which Soka Gakkai International (SGI) practitioners, as followers of Nichiren Buddhism, typically chanted for money, material success, and even for sex. (The present writer had witnessed this personally.) That this materialistic orientation persisted as a stereotype is admitted in a 2014 SGI publication—*Waking the Buddha: How the Most Dynamic and Empowering Buddhist Movement in History is Changing Our Concept of Religion*—written by Clark Strand, a former Zen Buddhist monk who currently serves as a contributing editor of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*.<sup>55</sup> As a “religion writer,”<sup>56</sup> Strand is not an SGI practitioner, but obviously has great respect for this highly multicultural and international movement of Buddhist “humanism.”<sup>57</sup> Strand notes that the first founder of SGI, Nichiren, taught that “ordinary people could change their karma and attain enlightenment in this lifetime simply by chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*.”<sup>58</sup> This practice was a “revolutionary vision of Buddhism.”<sup>59</sup> It “empowered lay people to take charge of their spiritual and material destiny.”<sup>60</sup>

To this day, SGI practitioners enshrine, in their homes, a sacred “object of devotion,” called the Gohonzon scroll, and “chant *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* to [the Gohonzon] each morning and evening.”<sup>61</sup> Although other Buddhist texts are acknowledged, SGI holds that the *Lotus Sutra* enshrines the highest teachings of the Buddha, so much so that simply venerating its title (in Japanese, *myoho-renge-kyo*, prefixed by the Sanskrit verb, *Nam*, “to honor”) through chanting, morning and evening, is sufficient to transform one's life and destiny. By means of chanting and engaging with the “Mystic Law” (as the sacred phrase, *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, is reverently called), the practitioner begins to “wake the Buddha” within.<sup>62</sup> Self-benefit is seen as a path towards self-realization. When the passion-driven self sees itself in relation to others, then the Buddha-nature self awakens, transforming selfish desire into a universal compassion that seeks the benefit of others.

This is nothing other than the Buddha-nature “self” taught in the *Nirvana Sutra* (*Mahāparinirvāṇa Sātra*) and other Mahayana Buddhist texts. The doctrine of the Buddha-Nature, unknown in Theravāda Buddhism, arose within Mahāyāna Buddhism, from which SGI sprang. Based on the teachings of Japanese Buddhism as taught by the 13th-century Buddhist reformer, Nichiren Daishonin (1222–1282), Soka Gakkai (literally, “Value-Creating Society”) was founded in 1930 by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944). Josei Toda (1900–1958) was Makiguchi’s successor. During Toda’s leadership, the Soka Gakkai, which had some 3,000 members before World War II, grew to over 750,000 households by late 1957 before his death the following year, as had been his goal. Daisaku Ikeda succeeded him in 1960 as third president, and immediately began plans to travel abroad, first to the United States, to encourage a handful of Soka Gakkai members that lived there. This was the start of the global spread of Soka Gakkai. On January 26, 1975, on the island of Guam, Daisaku Ikeda founded Soka Gakkai International (SGI). On this historic occasion, Ikeda convened a gathering of representative members from 51 countries and territories. At that critical juncture, the movement consciously transcended the boundaries of an ethnically Japanese religion. While affirming, true to its history, its Japanese origin, SGI proclaimed its universal mission.

Strand goes on to say that “Soka Gakkai is Buddhism taken as far as Buddhism—or, for that matter, any religion—can go.”<sup>63</sup> Yes, it is a gigantic step from SGI’s first founder, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, through its second founder, Josei Todai, to SGI’s third founder, Daisaku Ikeda. Ikeda has taken Nichiren Buddhism from the practice of simply chanting a Buddhist mantra (in this case, chanting the “*daimoku*” or “title” of the *Lotus Sutra*)<sup>64</sup> as a means to direct enlightenment to promoting world peace through the “human revolution” of inner-directed personal development. Strand credits SGI’s transformation to Ikeda’s “internationalization of the movement” when SGI was formally established on Guam in 1975 (thus marking the missionary expansion from its origin in Japan) and, prior to that, by “Ikeda’s first trip to America” in 1960.<sup>65</sup> According to Strand, Ikeda’s message is “promoting world peace through individual happiness.”<sup>66</sup>

Since then, SGI has established itself globally. Its remarkable growth is a clear measure of its success. In representing its message as universal, no single country has special status (apart from Japan’s distinction as SGI’s place of origin). So, in the 2009 publication of this book, SGI’s perspective on America was selective. In that sense, the present writer has privileged America. Yet this is justified by the manner in which Ikeda himself has described America’s spiritual potential.

Earlier in this chapter, excerpts from Ikeda’s *Songs for America*<sup>67</sup> were cited. This slender volume features four prose-poems: “Soar—Into the Vast Skies of Freedom! Into the New Century!” (July 21, 2000); “The Sun of *Jiyu* Over A New Land” (January 27, 1993); “Arise, the Sun of the Century” (February 26, 1987); “To My Beloved American Friends—Youthful Bodhisattvas of the

Earth” (June 20, 1981). More poems on America have been “in the works” since the 2009 publication of *Religious Myths and Visions of America*. Newly published poems, to be sure, reaffirming what was previously published. One notable example will demonstrate this point.

In 2014, I. B. Taurus published *Journey of Life: Selected Poems of Daisaku Ikeda*, the first of three volumes (two forthcoming) of Ikeda’s poetry translated from the original Japanese.<sup>68</sup> I. B. Taurus has published over a dozen other titles by Ikeda as well, including lectures and dialogues with high-profile religious and political leaders. In addition to being a prolific writer of dialogues, lectures, essays, philosophical writings, novels and children’s books, Ikeda is also an accomplished poet.

Let there be no mistake about Ikeda’s praise of other countries. Throughout *Journey of Life*, poems are devoted to a diverse array of countries as Japan, Italy, India, Malaysia, Okinawa, the Philippines, as well as America. For instance, in “Toll the bell of the new renaissance: To my dear fellow members of Italy,” Ikeda calls upon SGI’s Italian practitioners to be “standard-bearers of a new renaissance.”<sup>69</sup> Of course, the comparison here is to the Italian Renaissance. Carrying this metaphor forward, in Italy today, a magazine called *Il Nuovo Rinascimento* [The New Renaissance] is published for SGI members.

Later in the collection, Ikeda invokes the American Renaissance (also called New England Renaissance). Ikeda’s “The Sun of *Jiyu* over a New Land: To My Treasured Friends of Los Angeles, the City of My Dreams” (which previously appeared in *Songs for America*) is a 13-page poem presented at the Second SGI-USA General Meeting, held in Santa Monica, California, on January 27, 1993.<sup>70</sup> The poem was presented in a speech on the occasion of the Second SGI-USA General Meeting, held in Santa Monica, California, on January 27, 1993.<sup>71</sup> Significantly, President Ikeda presented “The Sun of *Jiyu* over a New Land” to SGI-USA members in Los Angeles after the 1992 Los Angeles riots triggered by the acquittal of police on trial for use of excessive force and brutality in the arrest of Rodney King, a videotape of which had been widely shown in various media.

Some interesting information is found in these verses. The reader learns that the future world headquarters of SGI will be in Los Angeles (“And here rises the splendid form / of the future site of the SGI headquarters”).<sup>72</sup> Just as “Kansai is the heart . . . for kosen-rufu in Japan,” so “Los Angeles plays this self-same role for the entire world.”<sup>73</sup> (Loosely, *Kōsen-rufu* means “proclamation” of the Buddhist message, far and wide, resulting in widespread acceptance of that message.)

In “The Sun of *Jiyu* Over a New Land,” Ikeda invokes the metaphor of a ship on its journey to “our destination—America’s distant future.”<sup>74</sup> The sails of the SGI ship are “the Stars and Stripes” and the “tricolor flag of the SGI.”<sup>75</sup> Ikeda calls for his followers to transcend their “lesser self” (described as a “hard shell” and aspire to “realize” and awaken their innate “greater self”<sup>76</sup> of compassion for the suffering of others and a resolve to do

something to alleviate it. SGI Buddhists use the term “human revolution” (i.e., human transformation) to describe this process. Here, this form of Buddhism appears to abandon the traditional Buddhist notion of “no-self” in favor of cultivating the Buddha-nature self.

Another poem—which also appeared in *Songs for America*—is “Arise, the Sun of the Century.”<sup>77</sup> Ikeda calls upon his followers to be “model citizens.”<sup>78</sup> “Take compassionate action for others.”<sup>79</sup> Good teachings these are, since they are exhortations to goodly deeds. In “The Triumph of the Human Spirit,” Ikeda defines “Renaissance”:

The word renaissance signifies  
the radiant triumph of the human spirit,  
the full flowering of  
the infinite power and potential  
of a single individual,  
the grand undertaking of constructing  
a magnificent sense of self,  
a new society.<sup>80</sup>

Speaking of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Ikeda goes on to say:

Let us set out in quest  
of the dawn of a new renaissance,  
guided on this  
vivid journey of inquiry  
by two great American scholars.<sup>81</sup>

Another of Ikeda’s works is *America Will Be! Conversations on Hope, Freedom, and Democracy*.<sup>82</sup> This is a dialogue between Ikeda and American historian Vincent Harding, friend and advisor to the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., won the 2014 “Society of Professors of Education Book Award,” according to the publisher. While an engaging interchange on America, the present writer could find no definitive pronouncement by Ikeda on any significance that SGI itself might attach to America. This is not surprising, since the dialogue was between two individuals, not representatives acting in their respective official capacities.

The foundation of SGI spirituality is “the Mystic Law,” defined as “The ultimate law of life and the universe. The law of *Nam-myoho-enge-kyo*.”<sup>83</sup> This practice has its roots in the 13th-century. Nichiren Daishonin considered the *Lotus Sutra* superior to all other Buddhist texts. On April 28, 1253, Nichiren established the practice of chanting *Nam-myoho-enge-kyo*—which is simply venerating the title of the *Lotus Sutra* itself as the supreme Buddhist text. He taught that “this phrase encompasses all laws and teachings within itself.”<sup>84</sup> Chanting, moreover, “includes the benefit of conducting

all virtuous practices.”<sup>85</sup> *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* is defined by present-day SGI practitioners so: “*Nam* means ‘devotion to; *myoho* means ‘Mystic Law’; *renge* refers to the lotus flower, . . . ; *kyo* means *sutra*, the teaching of the Buddha.”<sup>86</sup> Why (and how) venerating the *Lotus Sutra* by invoking its title (as translated into Japanese) is not obvious, except that it is a means to sudden enlightenment by awakening the Buddha-nature self within. For the one who vests confidence in the practice, chanting somehow triggers paranormal powers.

Although Ikeda affirms that “Buddhism is reason,”<sup>87</sup> whatever causal explanation as to how chanting results in personal and social transformation ultimately is a matter of faith. The practice of chanting is self-validating, provided that it bears fruit, whether real or imagined. That must be why the “Mystic Law” is “mystic.” Somehow, “devotion to the mystic law of cause and effect through sound vibration” potentializes the latent Buddha-nature. To invoke the essence of the *Lotus Sutra*, through intonation, is to evoke the essential Buddha inside—some way, somehow. Perhaps it’s all a matter of faith, as in most any devotional practice. Thus chanting is regarded as the most expedient means for tapping into and awakening the “Buddha-nature self” dormant within.

Put differently, Buddhist practice and Buddha nature are part of an “if-then” equation. While a direct, cause-and-effect linkage between the “Mystic Law”—set in motion by chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* to the *Gohonzon* morning and evening—and—is not readily apparent, what is striking is how Ikeda has transformed SGI into the altruistic religious organization that it is today. SGI is committed to “engaged Buddhism,” that is, Buddhism with a social gospel and mission. The ethical teachings of SGI are noteworthy, whereby SGI adherents are encouraged to dedicate their time and treasure to the betterment of society and the amelioration of human suffering.

Another teaching that is an anomaly within Nichiren Buddhism is the emphasis on self and desire, when traditional Buddhism teaches the doctrine of “no self” and cessation of desire as a path to liberation. Consider Ikeda’s teaching: “Buddhism means putting the teachings and practice. Practice equals faith. With sincere prayer and action, our desires cannot possibly fail to be fulfilled.”<sup>88</sup> Clark Strand, whose 2014 book, *Waking the Buddha*, at the beginning of this chapter update, posed this very question to President Ikeda in a 2008 *Tricycle* interview.<sup>89</sup> Clark asks Ikeda:

Nichiren Buddhists chant the *daimoku* [*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*] to get what they want—a successful career, better health, a good marriage, even world peace. Nevertheless, from a purely traditional point of view, it would seem a violation of basic Buddhist doctrine to chant for the satisfaction of earthly desires rather than striving to overcome them. Isn’t this a contradiction?<sup>90</sup>

This is Ikeda’s reply:

If you think that the purpose of religion is happiness, there really is no contradiction. The ideal of Mahayana Buddhism is the realization of happiness for oneself and for others. Nowhere is this more completely set out than in the *Lotus Sutra*, which recognizes the Buddha-nature in all people—women and men, those with formal education and those without. It declares that all people, without regard to their class, origin, personal, cultural, or social background, can attain enlightenment. Our recitation of the title of the *Lotus Sutra* is a way of renewing our vow to live in accord with this ideal.<sup>91</sup>

Here, “the realization of happiness for oneself *and* for others” is conjunctive, not disjunctive—i.e., “and” is what is paramount, not “or.” Divorced from the happiness of others, individual happiness may come at the expense of others. The insistent self is a narrowly focused, immature, limited. Selfishness is a *cul-de-sac*, a moral and social dead end. Perhaps the answer is found in making the quantum leap from the “lesser self” to the “greater self”<sup>92</sup>—that is, the Buddha-nature self, the selfless self, whose desires, motivated by compassion, are altruistic. For its part, America has a “world role” as the future hub of SGI, where the “tricolor flag of the SGI” flies side-by-side with “the Stars and Stripes”<sup>93</sup> as the SGI-USA flagship advances toward “our destination—America’s distant future.”<sup>94</sup> Here, America’s destiny is seen as bound up with the progress of Buddhism, in its SGI form.

SGI adherents, the world over, are challenging themselves to surmount the individual ego, i.e., the “lesser self” (Japanese: *shoga*), in each, and develop the “greater self” (Japanese: *taiga*) for one and all. Here, SGI makes axiomatic this moral calculus: a person’s capacity for joy can increase to the degree that this same individual strives to bring about the joy of others. In this sense, altruism has a reflexive effect: it is good to do good, not only for the welfare of others, but for one’s own good as well. Cultivated to a refined degree, such altruism goes beyond enlightened self-interest. And so the part-to-whole dynamic is energized, in what might be thought of as an intentional “butterfly effect” that goes beyond chaos theory. As President Ikeda famously said: “‘A great inner revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and, further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind’—this was the conviction that dominated all my writing.”<sup>95</sup> Each person can make a difference. Through dialogue and friendship, SGI practitioners hope to help individuals awaken to their innate potential and surmount the limitations that they may have placed on themselves.

In the SGI view, America is not a special nation intrinsically, but is so extrinsically, in terms of its great capacity and wealth of resources. America does not (or should not) act alone. Daisaku Ikeda’s gospel of global citizenship derives from his insight into the bodhisattva’s vow of compassion, to seek enlightenment both for one’s self and others. “What, pray tell,” the reader may ask, “is a bodhisattva?” The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers this

definition: “One destined to become a Buddha; a Buddhist saint who, having only one birth to undergo before attaining Nirvana, consents to be reborn for the sake of suffering mankind; a superhuman being of infinite wisdom and compassion.” As a community of informal bodhisattvas, SGI members believe that every individual—American SGI Buddhists included—has a mission in this world and has something of value to contribute. President Ikeda has singled out American SGI Buddhists with a special sense of mission and purpose, in his message published on the first anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks:

It is my unchanging belief that the happiness and future of humanity depends on the United States. By the United States, I mean each of you, the members of the SGI-USA. The spread of Nichiren Buddhism in America is the path leading to its spread throughout the world. In this sense, all of you are world leaders. . . . I am always praying earnestly for the health and great happiness of my precious, precious friends in the SGI-USA, each of whom is standing up to fulfill a magnificent mission, as well as for the eternal development and prosperity of America.<sup>96</sup>

Taken to a higher level, and extrapolating from SGI teachings themselves, the present writer can venture to say that the SGI view of America is basically that the United States should taken a national vow to become a *bodhisattva nation* internationally. Comparatively, as a concluding postscript for this chapter, the Dalai Lama’s teachings on America’s world role have remained virtually the same since this book was first published in 2009. On March 6, 2014, the Dalai Lama opened a session of the U.S. Senate with prayers. Afterward, the Dalai Lama said that he considered America to be “really a champion of democracy, freedom.” “These traditional values are, I think, very, very relevant in today’s world,” the Dalai Lama went on to say. “After all, you are the leading nation in the free world. So, (show) self-confidence.”<sup>97</sup> The Dalai Lama’s message is consistent. “America is a champion of democracy and liberty,” the Dalai Lama told his American audience of over 3,500 listeners at Nova Southeastern University in Davie, Florida on February 23, 2010. “You should be proud of those values.”<sup>98</sup>

## Notes

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39. Thurman, *Inner Revolution*, 221.
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45. Frechette, "Democracy and Democratization," 105.
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60. Strand, *Waking the Buddha*, 6.
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73. Ikeda, *Journey of Life*, 238–239.
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79. Ikeda, *Journey of Life*, 97.
80. Ikeda, *Journey of Life*, 372–377 [375].
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87. Ikeda, *Journey of Life*, 245.
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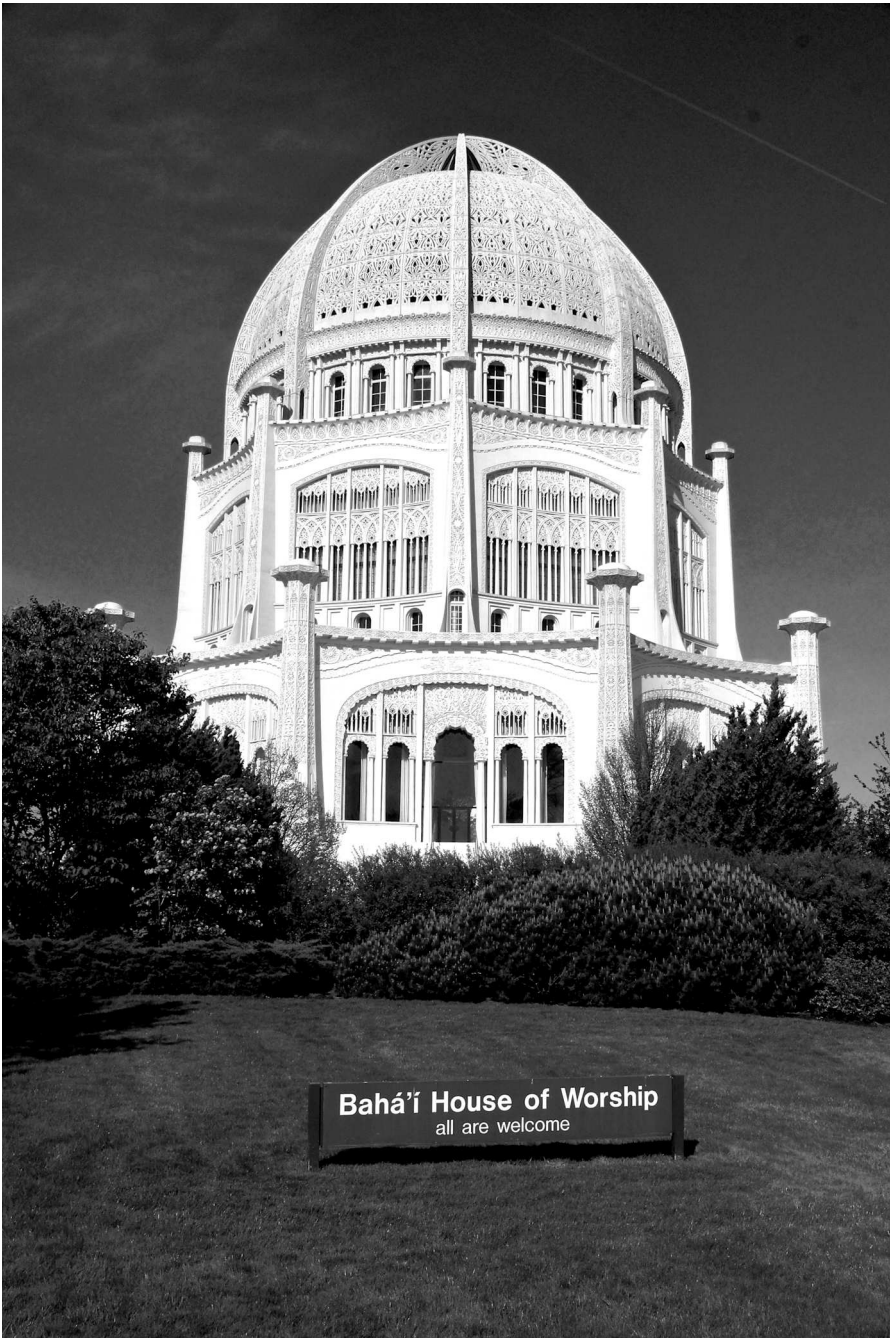


Figure 12.1. Baha'i House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois. Mission statement:  
*"The central purpose of the Baha'i Faith is to contribute to global unity and help build  
spiritually and materially vibrant communities."*  
See <http://www.bahaitemple.com/>. (Photo courtesy of David Smith.)

## Chapter 12

# Baha'i Myths and Visions of America

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*The American people are indeed worthy of being the first to build the Tabernacle of the Great Peace, and proclaim the oneness of mankind. . . . For America hath developed powers and capacities greater and more wonderful than other nations. . . . Its future is even more promising, for its influence and illumination are far-reaching. It will lead all nations spiritually.*

—'Abdu'l-Baha (1912)<sup>1</sup>

*Exert yourselves; your mission is unspeakably glorious. Should success crown your enterprise, America will assuredly evolve into a center from which waves of spiritual power will emanate, and the throne of the Kingdom of God will, in the plenitude of its majesty and glory, be firmly established.*

—'Abdu'l-Baha (1917)<sup>2</sup>

As America continues to diversify, one new religion seeks to unify: the Baha'i Faith.

The Baha'i Faith, historically, dates back to 1844. "The Baha'i Faith is the youngest of the world's independent religions," states the official website of the Baha'i World Centre, located on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel.<sup>3</sup> Established in 189 independent countries and 46 territories, the Baha'i community today numbers around seven million members, who hail from across the world's races, religions, and nations, including over 2,100 different ethnicities. The Baha'i Faith preaches a gospel of unity, and it has a global community to match and to model the potentialities of its grander vision. The distinctive nature of the Baha'i Faith is its emphasis on promoting the oneness of humankind and bringing about world unity. "In every Dispensation, the light of Divine Guidance has been focused upon one central theme," proclaims 'Abdu'l-Baha (1844–1921), son of and successor to Baha'u'llah (1817–1892), prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith. "In this wondrous Revelation, this glorious century, the foundation of the Faith of

God and the distinguishing feature of His Law is the consciousness of the Oneness of Mankind.”<sup>4</sup> This is the hallmark, the salient leitmotiv, the organizing principle, the moral basis, and the grand vision of the Baha’i Faith as a whole. As such, Baha’is, whether in America or abroad, are described as the “bearers of a new-born Gospel.”<sup>5</sup> A previously little-known religion, the Baha’i Faith is emerging from obscurity, as the following newsworthy items will demonstrate.

On July 8, 2008, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee determined that two Baha’i shrines in Israel—the Shrine of the Bab on Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel, and the Shrine of Baha’u’llah, located near Old Acre on Israel’s northern coast, possess “outstanding universal value” and should be considered as part of the cultural heritage of humanity.<sup>6</sup> Joining such other internationally recognized sites like the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids, the Taj Mahal, Stonehenge, the Vatican, the Old City of Jerusalem, and the remains of the recently destroyed Bamiyan Buddhist statues in Afghanistan, the Baha’i shrines are the first sites associated with a religious tradition born in modern times to be added to the list. Similarly, in 2007 the State of Illinois announced that the Baha’i House of Worship in Wilmette (north of Chicago) had been voted one of the “Seven Wonders” of Illinois (see Figure 12.1).<sup>7</sup>

Ideologically, the Baha’i perspective on the destiny of America should be contextualized within the Baha’i paradigm of unity, and, more specifically, within the Baha’i view of “sacred history” (or as systematic theologians of Christian doctrine would term it, “salvation history”). That is to say, America will fulfill a world-unifying purpose consonant with a larger civilizational purpose for which the Baha’i religion sees its own instrumental role. Briefly, the Baha’i Faith is a world religion whose purpose is to unite all the races, religions, and nations into one common homeland. Baha’is are the followers of Baha’u’llah, who essentially claimed to be a world-messiah, fulfilling what are believed to be convergent prophecies from historically prior world religions.<sup>8</sup> In his epistle to Queen Victoria, written from his prison cell in ‘Akká, Palestine around 1870, Baha’u’llah proclaims: “That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith.”<sup>9</sup> This, in part, is a statement about how it is now time for the peoples of the world, as a whole, to recognize the essential oneness humanity—and of the world religions as well—as the collective consciousness needed to bring about world peace, and that this process will ultimately validate all faiths.

The Baha’i vision of the destiny of America is part of a grander vision of social evolution, affecting the planet as a whole, which, in the course of human events, will lead to a Golden Age of world unity—a unity characterized not by regimented uniformity, but by spectacular diversity within a morally and technically advanced global civilization. The unity that the Baha’i Faith promotes is a guarantor of diversity by fostering social environments where diversity can flourish, thereby enriching the human

experience. As the epigraph above suggests, America “will lead all nations spiritually.” What is the logic behind this claim? An even more basic question is this: What is the character of this new religion that makes such an auspicious claim regarding America?

## **A Brief Introduction to the Baha'i Faith<sup>10</sup>**

Before “social justice” served as the secular philosophy of modern democracies, the great world religions had established ethical principles and social laws for the ennobling of individuals and the ordering of societies. The Baha'i Faith claims to be “endowed with a system of law, precept, and institutions capable of bringing into existence a global commonwealth ordered by principles of social justice.”<sup>11</sup> In the Baha'i hierarchy of values, social justice is a cardinal principle. As a collective ethical orientation, the Baha'i concept of social justice is intimately linked with the principle of unity. “The purpose of justice,” declared Baha'u'llah, “is the appearance of unity among men.”<sup>12</sup> Unity, which is predicated on social justice, is thus the organizing principle of the Baha'i system of values. As such, a Baha'i theory of social justice can be articulated from the Baha'i sacred writings themselves, and amplified by official Baha'i statements at the diplomatic level. A brief historical sketch of the religion will render a phenomenology of its social justice/unity orientation more meaningful.

The Baha'i Faith developed from its roots in the Babi religion, a messianic movement originating within Shi'a Islam, yet bearing all of the earmarks of a new and independent religion.<sup>13</sup> Baha'i history dates back to the evening of May 22, 1844, in the city of Shiraz in Persia (now Iran), when a young merchant, Sayyid 'Ali-Muhammad, declared himself to be the Bab (1819–1850), or “Gate”—that is, a messenger from God sent to proclaim the imminent advent of one greater than himself. Religious and state persecution fell upon him and his followers, leading to the torture and religious martyrdom of many. After the Bab was executed by a firing squad of 750 soldiers in the barracks square of Tabriz on July 9, 1850, the majority of his coreligionists, the Babis, turned to Mirza Husayn-'Ali Nuri—known as Baha'u'llah (a spiritual title, meaning the “Glory of God”)—as the messianic figure whose imminent advent was the central religious message of the Bab.

Born to a high-ranking minister of the Shah in 1817 Tehran, Baha'u'llah was incarcerated in a subterranean dungeon in 1852—because he was a leader of the proscribed Babi religion—then was exiled to Baghdad in 1853, where he remained until his subsequent exile to Istanbul (Constantinople) and Edirne (Adrianople) in 1863, and from thence to the fortress prison of Akka (Acre, Palestine, now Israel), where he arrived in August 1868. One of the signal events of Baha'u'llah's ministry was the public proclamation of his mission, the purpose of which was to unify the world through advanced social principles and new institutions. This proclamation may

also be regarded as one of the first international peace missions of modern times. Beginning in September 1867, Baha'u'llah addressed individual and collective epistles to world leaders—including Queen Victoria, Kaiser Wilhelm I, Czar Alexander Nicholas II of Russia, Emperor Napoleon III, Pope Pius IX, Emperor Franz Joseph, Sultan 'Abdu'l-Aziz, Nasiri'd-Din Shah, the presidents of the Americas collectively, among others—summoning them to disarmament, reconciliation, justice, and the “Most Great Peace.” Baha'u'llah also addressed the leaders of the Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths, calling them to religious reconciliation and recognition of Baha'u'llah as the promised messiah of all religions.

Upon his death in 1892, Baha'u'llah was succeeded, under the terms of his will and testament, by his eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Baha, who further developed the Baha'i community in gradual application of the laws and precepts that Baha'u'llah had laid down in his Most Holy Book (Arab, *al-Kitāb al-Aqdas*; Persian, *Kitāb-i Aqdas*). When he was liberated by the Young Turks Revolution in 1908, 'Abdu'l-Baha traveled to Europe, North Africa, and North America to promulgate his father's principles of social justice and unity. A frequent theme of his public addresses was interracial harmony, interreligious reconciliation, and ideal international relations. He also promoted gender equality and the establishment of adjudicative organs to resolve international disputes. 'Abdu'l-Baha lent great impetus to the spread of the Baha'i Faith in America and abroad when he revealed his *Tablets of the Divine Plan* in 1916–1917. After his passing in 1921, and in accordance with the terms of his will and testament, 'Abdu'l-Baha's eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi (who was studying at Oxford University at the time), assumed leadership of the Baha'i world until his death in 1957. Based on the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* as a model for fostering systematic growth, Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957) promulgated a series of expansive “Plans” for systematically establishing Baha'i communities in a greater number of countries, territories, and locales—and had the charisma to inspire their successful completion.

In his most important work (*Kitāb-i Aqdas*), Baha'u'llah had called for the establishment of a local House of Justice in every community. To distinguish these from institutions with an agenda for political power, 'Abdu'l-Baha gave them the temporary title of “Spiritual Assemblies.” Each nine-member local and National Spiritual Assembly, elected annually by all of the adult Baha'is and their delegates in the respective local or national community, oversees the growth and welfare of the Baha'i community within its jurisdiction, fosters unity among the various elements of society, and furthers the work of social and economic development.

In 1963, the Baha'i world had become sufficiently internationalized to elect the first Universal House of Justice (the world Baha'i governing body) in the Royal Albert Hall in London. With its Seat located in the Baha'i World Centre on Mt. Carmel in Haifa, Israel, the Universal House of Justice—elected every five years by the members of all of the National Spiritual Assemblies from around the world—administers the affairs of the Baha'i



world and promotes Baha'i principles of justice and unity worldwide. As publicly declared in its *Constitution*, the stated mission of the Universal House of Justice is, *inter alia*: "to do its utmost for the realization of greater cordiality and comity amongst the nations and for the attainment of universal peace"; "to safeguard the personal rights, freedom and initiative of individuals"; "to give attention to the preservation of human honour, to the development of countries and the stability of states"; "to provide for the arbitration and settlement of disputes arising between peoples"; and "to foster that which is conducive to the enlightenment and illumination of the souls of men and the advancement and betterment of the world."<sup>14</sup> These are some of the duties of the Universal House of Justice that are mandated in its charter document. In fine, the Universal House of Justice works to promote ideal international relations through the application of Baha'i principles and practices at local, national, and international levels.

The diplomatic work of the Baha'i Faith is carried out by the Universal House of Justice, the Baha'i International Community (BIC), and external affairs representatives appointed by their respective National Spiritual Assemblies. Ethics-based and religious nongovernmental organizations (RNGOs) are playing increasingly significant roles in their consultative collaborations with the United Nations. As an RNGO, the BIC represents a network of 182 democratically elected National Spiritual Assemblies that act on behalf of Baha'is worldwide. The BIC is the voice of the Baha'i community in international affairs. The BIC focuses on four core areas, each of which encompass social justice issues: (1) promotion of a universal standard for human rights; (2) advancement of women; (3) promotion of just and equitable global prosperity; and (4) development of moral capabilities. The BIC also defends the rights of Baha'is in countries where they are persecuted, such as in Iran and Egypt.

As previously stated, Baha'i communities are established in 235 countries and dependent territories, representing more than 2,100 different tribal, racial, and ethnic groups. At present, the country with the greatest number of Baha'is is India, where its magnificent "Lotus Temple" just outside of New Delhi is now said to be the most visited religious edifice in the world. Although its adherents number only seven million, the Baha'i Faith is now the second most widespread of the world's independent religions, according to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*<sup>15</sup> and *Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year* (1992). The statistical distribution of Baha'is worldwide may be studied by consulting the *Britannica* yearbooks in their annual reports on religion.

Social justice is relative to prevailing social values. Yet out of this relativity, consensus may be reached by identifying common denominators. "Justice . . . is a universal quality," 'Abdu'l-Baha stated in Paris on November 17, 1912. He added that "justice must be sacred, and the rights of all the people must be considered."<sup>16</sup> The Baha'i ethical commitment to social justice is paramount. "The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice," Baha'u'llah writes, "turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that

I may confide in thee.” “By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor,” Baha’u’llah goes on to say. “Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.”<sup>17</sup> The challenge for Baha’is, then, is to more systematically develop Baha’i principles of social justice, to apply them within their own faith-communities, and then to offer these practiced precepts as a model for wider adoption. In his epistle to Queen Victoria (c. 1870), Baha’u’llah endorsed parliamentary democracy as an ideal form of governance:

We have also heard that thou hast entrusted the reins of counsel into the hands of the representatives of the people. Thou, indeed, hast done well. . . . O ye the elected representatives of the people in every land! Take ye counsel together, and let your concern be only for that which profiteth mankind and bettereth the condition thereof, if ye be of them that scan heedfully.<sup>18</sup>

Referring to his own mission as that of a “World Reformer,”<sup>19</sup> Baha’u’llah promulgated social principles that are wider in scope than the process of electing governments. Democracy is more than the election of governments; it is the refinement of governments as well.

The Baha’i community, in a measured participation in political democracy, eschews partisan politics as polarizing and divisive. While exercising their civic obligation in voting, individual Baha’is distance themselves from the political theatre of party politics. Embracing many aspects of democracy, they shun campaigning. Instead, Baha’is work within the body politic, applying Baha’i principles to better society. These principles include, among others: (1) human unity; (2) social justice; (3) racial harmony; (4) interfaith cooperation; (5) gender equality; (6) wealth equity (economic justice); (7) social and economic development; (8) international law; (9) human rights; (10) freedom of conscience; (11) individual responsibility; (12) harmony of science and religion; (13) international scientific cooperation; (14) international standards/world intercommunication; (15) international language; (16) universal education; (17) environmentalism; (18) world commonwealth; (19) world tribunal; (20) world peace; (21) search after truth; (22) oneness of religion; (23) love of God; (24) nobility of character (acquiring virtues); (25) advancing civilization (individual purpose); (26) work as worship; (27) ideal marriage; (28) family values; (29) model communities; (30) religious teleology (Progressive Revelation); (31) Baha’i doctrinal integrity; (32) Baha’i institutional support (the “Covenant”); (33) promoting Baha’i values. These principles and practices work synergistically in concert to refine moral character, advance civilization, inspire new approaches to conflict resolution, and endow human consciousness with a vibrant vision of social harmony.

In its June 4, 1992, presentation to the Plenary of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, Earth Summit

'92, Rio de Janiero), the BIC has epitomized the foundation of social justice from a Baha'i perspective: "The fundamental spiritual truth of our age is the oneness of humanity."<sup>20</sup> (In Baha'i terminology, "oneness" means "unity.") It follows that "universal acceptance of this principle—with its implications for social and economic justice, universal participation in non-adversarial decision making, peace and collective security, equality of the sexes, and universal education—will make possible the reorganization and administration of the world as one country, the home of humankind."<sup>21</sup> Note the linkage that such Baha'i statements strike between social justice and world unity. These principles are comprehensive and perhaps may best be studied within a framework suggested by 'Abdu'l-Baha himself: "The teachings of Baha'u'llah are the light of this age and the spirit of this century. Expound each of them at every gathering:

The first is investigation of truth,  
The second, the oneness of mankind,  
The third, universal peace,  
The fourth, conformity between science and divine revelation,  
The fifth, abandonment of racial, religious, worldly and political  
prejudices, prejudices which destroy the foundation of mankind,  
The sixth is righteousness and justice,  
The seventh, the betterment of morals and heavenly education,  
The eighth, the equality of the two sexes,  
The ninth, the diffusion of knowledge and education,  
The tenth, economic questions, and so on and so forth."<sup>22</sup>

While space does not permit elaboration of these (and other) Baha'i principles of unity, many are fairly self-evident. They provide a necessary context for understanding what lies behind the Baha'i vision of the destiny of America. By Baha'i standards, America will be measured by its ability to further unity at home and abroad, through developing an exemplary society while instrumentally promoting world order.

## **Baha'i Myths as a "Sacred History" of America**

There are actually a number of passages in Baha'i texts concerning the destiny of America. They are too numerous to treat here. While many, these statements reiterate salient themes. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, some of these themes will be highlighted. First, the term "America," as found in Baha'i texts, needs to be contextualized geopolitically.

Various configurations of the term "America" have rather self-evident geographical distinctions, such as "the Americas," "the Continent of America," "North America," and then, "America," which by itself most often is a metonymy (or synonym) for the "United States of America." Similarly, the

meaning of “America” in Baha’i texts is context-dependent, in that “America” variously represents: (1) the United States (including Alaska); (2) the United States and Canada; (3) North America; and (4) the Americas. In a talk delivered on September 5, 1912, at the St. James Methodist Church in Montreal, Canada, ‘Abdu’l-Baha indicates that Canada shares much the same destiny as the United States:

Praise be to God! I find these two great American nations highly capable and advanced in all that appertains to progress and civilization. These governments are fair and equitable. The motives and purposes of these people are lofty and inspiring. Therefore, it is my hope that these revered nations may become prominent factors in the establishment of international peace and the oneness of the world of humanity; that they may lay the foundations of equality and spiritual brotherhood among mankind.<sup>23</sup>

This is a mission and mandate to both the United States and Canada alike, indicating that “international peace and the oneness of the world of humanity” and laying the “foundations of equality and spiritual brotherhood among mankind” is not the province of any one country alone, but—to varying degrees according to the respective capacity of each—of all countries. Returning to the meaning of “America” in Baha’i texts, one passage that offers a prime example of a range of meanings that “America” adumbrates (i.e., the United States, Canada, North America, and the Americas) is as follows:

The Báb had in His *Qayyúmu’l-Asmá*, almost a hundred years previously, sounded His specific summons to the “peoples of the West” to “issue forth” from their “cities” and aid His Cause. Baha’u’llah, in His *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, had collectively addressed the Presidents of the Republics of the entire Americas, bidding them arise and “bind with the hands of justice the broken,” and “crush the oppressor” with the “rod of the commandments” of their Lord, and had, moreover, anticipated in His writings the appearance “in the West” of the “signs of His Dominion. ‘Abdu’l-Baha had, on His part, declared that the “illumination” shed by His Father’s Revelation upon the West would acquire an “extraordinary brilliancy,” and that the “light of the Kingdom” would “shed a still greater illumination upon the West” than upon the East. He had extolled the American continent in particular as “the land wherein the splendors of His Light shall be revealed, where the mysteries of His Faith shall be unveiled,” and affirmed that “it will lead all nations spiritually.” More specifically still, He had singled out the Great Republic of the West, the leading nation of that continent, declaring that its people were “indeed worthy of being the first to build the Tabernacle of the Most Great Peace and proclaim the oneness of mankind,” that it was “equipped and empowered to accomplish that which will adorn the pages of history, to become the envy of the world, and be blest in both the East and the West.”<sup>24</sup>

In this chapter, “America” will be understood to mean the United States of America. In a word, the place of America in the grand scheme of things is intimately bound up with the purpose of the existence of the Baha’i Faith itself: world unity. It should be added that “world unity” is an outcome of an integrated approach to social and economic development, equitable management of world resources, the potentializing of human resources through advanced educational strategies, effective conflict resolution, and the spiritual awakening of societies as a whole. The earliest mention of “America” in the Baha’i Writings occurs in a passage, the context of which indicates that “America” stands for what today would be commonly referred to as “the Americas,” or the Western Hemisphere. In 1873, Baha’u’llah addressed the rulers and leaders of the Americas in the single most important Baha’i text, the Most Holy Book (*Kitáb-i Aqdas*):

Hearken ye, O Rulers of America and the Presidents of the Republics therein, unto that which the Dove is warbling on the Branch of Eternity: “There is none other God but Me, the Ever-Abiding, the Forgiving, the All-Bountiful.” Adorn ye the temple of dominion with the ornament of justice and of the fear of God, and its head with the crown of the remembrance of your Lord, the Creator of the heavens. Thus counselleth you He Who is the Dayspring of Names, as bidden by Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. The Promised One hath appeared in this glorified Station, whereat all beings, both seen and unseen, have rejoiced. . . . Bind ye the broken with the hands of justice, and crush the oppressor who flourisheth with the rod of the commandments of your Lord, the Ordainer, the All-Wise.<sup>25</sup>

This passage was written in 1873 or shortly prior to that. Serving as presidents (or as prime minister, as in the case of Canada) of the countries of the Americas in 1872 were the following (with nations listed alphabetically): Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, president of Argentina; John A. Macdonald, prime minister of Canada; Federico Errázuriz Zañartu, president of Chile; Eustorgio Salgar and Manuel Murillo Toro, presidents of Colombia; Tomás Guardia Gutiérrez, president of Costa Rica; Buenaventura Báez, president of the Dominican Republic; Gabriel García Moreno, president of Ecuador; Justo Rufino Barrios, president of Guatemala; Nissage Saget, president of Haiti; Benito Juárez and Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada, presidents of Mexico; José Vicente Cuadra, president of Nicaragua; Francisco Solano López, president of Paraguay; Manuel Pardo, president of Peru; Ulysses S. Grant, president of the United States of America; Lorenzo Batlle y Grau and Tomás Gomensoro, presidents of Uruguay; and Antonio Guzmán Blanco, president of Venezuela.<sup>26</sup> Here, the admonition to “bind ye the broken with the hands of justice, and crush the oppressor” would naturally devolve upon the United States of America, of which Ulysses S. Grant was president, as well as the other countries of the Western Hemisphere, as every nation has this obligation to safeguard and to promote the commonweal of its own citizens.

According to Shoghi Effendi, not only were “the Rulers of America” significantly “spared the ominous and emphatic warnings” that Baha’u’llah had “uttered against the crowned heads of the world,” but “upon the sovereign rulers of the Western Hemisphere” was conferred the “distinction” of exhorting them to “bring their corrective and healing influence to bear upon the injustices perpetrated by the tyrannical and the ungodly.”<sup>27</sup> “Had this Cause been revealed in the West,” Baha’u’llah is reported to have said in the untranslated portion of Nabíl’s Narrative (an authoritative account of Bábí and early Baha’i history), “had Our verses been sent from the West to Persia and other countries of the East, it would have become evident how the people of the Occident would have embraced Our Cause.”<sup>28</sup> It is clear that Baha’u’llah saw greater capacity and receptivity to his sociomoral principles in the West than in the East. Above and beyond those passages that clearly foreshadow the “signs of His dominion” in the West, Shoghi Effendi points to the “no less significant verbal affirmations” in which Baha’u’llah, “according to reliable eyewitnesses,” had “more than once made in regard to the glorious destiny which America was to attain in the days to come.”<sup>29</sup> So, while no direct writing by Baha’u’llah regarding the destiny of America is extant, reliable sources provide sufficient attestation of Baha’u’llah’s oral statements regarding America’s promise and future preeminence.

Subsequent to Baha’u’llah was ‘Abdu’l-Baha, who, after his father, Baha’u’llah, had passed away in 1892, led the Baha’i world until he himself left this mortal world in 1921, when he was succeeded by his grandson, the Oxford-educated Shoghi Effendi. Both ‘Abdu’l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi had some profound thoughts about the destiny of America. In the course of their respective pronouncements on America, certain characterizations of American history and America’s world role were articulated in order to register particular points, as the rhetoric and rationale of those comments occasionally dictated. Such glosses on America gave rise to sometimes idealized representations and, at time, generalized critiques of America as well—all of which, taken together, comprise what may well be described, for the purposes of this book at least, as the Baha’i myths and visions of America.

According to historian Robert Stockman, American Baha’is, on the basis of these various pronouncements, have articulated a grand myth of America, which incorporates Baha’i ideals: “The American Baha’is utilized the historic events and basic principles of their new religion to define a new myth of America, one that contained much of the confidence and optimism of the traditional Protestant view of America as a ‘redeemer nation’.”<sup>30</sup> Stockman elaborates further:

Like any religious group, the American Baha’is have constructed a sacred history, or myth, about their country. This sacred history is primarily based on the values found in Baha’i scripture and does not appear to be borrowed from American Protestantism or secular culture to a significant degree. However, the Baha’i myth’s concept of America’s uniqueness,

its view of the possible future greatness of America, and its consequent critique of current American social conditions bear some remarkable parallels to the Protestant myth.<sup>31</sup>

Here, by religious “myth,” Stockman means a “sacred history.” No one should misconstrue the meaning of the term, “myth.” Stockman is careful to explain that the terms “sacred history” and “myth” are, here at least, used “synonymously.” These terms denote a “theologically based understanding of the importance of the events of history.” Since history cannot possibly record every single fact, consequently “historians must sift through facts and select only those that are most relevant to their studies.” This selection process necessarily includes “a strong element of judgment and bias based on one’s methods, ideological assumptions, and interests.” A sacred history is no exception, for “it is distinguished by the use of theological beliefs as the primary selection criteria for the inclusion of facts.” In Stockman’s and the present writer’s use of these more or less interchangeable terms, a caveat is in order: the “use of the word myth is not meant to suggest that a sacred history is untrue,” but simply a way “to give religious meaning to mundane events.”<sup>32</sup>

The specific parallel with the Protestant myth of America that Robert Stockman adduces is with America’s world role as “redeemer nation.” Earlier in the present book, the Protestant “master myth” of America has been described several times as a mandate “to colonize, Christianize, and civilize” and is closely associated with the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. This would seem to be very different from the “redeemer nation” vision alluded to in the passages above from Stockman’s work. It is important not to associate the Baha’i view with the superiority and prejudice inherent in “colonize, Christianize, and civilize.” Rather, the emphasis here is on America’s redemptive role: Stockman particularly alludes to a classic work in American studies, Ernest Lee Tuveson’s *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role*,<sup>33</sup> in which the idea of redemptive mission—which has motivated so much of American foreign policy—is as old as the Republic itself. Tuveson traces the development of this aspect of the American heritage from its Puritan origins, and tracks the idea of America’s mission and the millenarian ideal through successive stages of American history.

Americanist Deborah Madsen succinctly recapitulates this notion of America as a “redeemer nation.” America began as an experiment in theocracy (the reign of God). Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony believed that God intervened in human history to effect the salvation not only of individuals but also entire nations. Thus, the Puritans believed that the New World, and the Puritans themselves, had been singled out by God and were charged with a special destiny—to establish a model Christian community for the rest of the world to emulate. Madsen explains that

this idea of ecclesiastical perfection combined with millennial expectations and gave rise to the theory that here in the New World the purified

church would create the conditions for Christ's return to earth. The mission that inspired the Massachusetts Bay colonists was then charged with exceptional importance and urgency.<sup>34</sup>

The New World is thus the last and best hope for a fallen humanity that has only to look to the sanctified church in America for redemption. Consequently,

America and Americans are special, exceptional, because they are charged with saving the world from itself and, at the same time, America and Americans must sustain a high level of spiritual, political and moral commitment to this exceptional destiny—America must be as “a City upon a Hill” exposed to the eyes of the world.<sup>35</sup>

In Madsen's view, exceptionalism is an integral and distinctive feature of the American experience: “This concept has generated a self-consciousness and degree of introspection that is unique to American culture.”<sup>36</sup> The doctrine of America as a redeemer nation later developed into “an unquestioning belief in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, a profound commitment to the inevitability of American expansion and an uncompromising vision of America as the redeemer nation committed to extending the domain of freedom and America's control over it”<sup>37</sup> as well as a “racialised interpretation of national destiny” (i.e., American Anglo-Saxonism).<sup>38</sup> Under this analysis, Stockman's parallel is valid insofar as the Puritan ethic is concerned, but must be distanced from its pejorative transmogrification into the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. Indeed, a Baha'i view of America as a “redeemer nation” could only come about if America first redeems itself from the materialism and moral laxity that represents the very antithesis of the Puritan vision.

America is not the only country that is the subject of a Baha'i sacred history. Stockman points out that there are Baha'i sacred histories about other countries as well:

The American Baha'i sacred history is not a unique phenomenon; Baha'i sacred histories of Germany, Russia, China, India, Japan, Iran, Canada, and other countries undoubtedly have been created by the Baha'is of those countries, based on statements about those nations in the Baha'i scriptures. A folk tradition is inevitable whenever the Baha'i religion is introduced to a new culture or nation.<sup>39</sup>

As for the Baha'i myth of America, Stockman further notes that “the creation of an American Baha'i sacred history inevitably represents an act of social criticism as well, for some events in American history are negatively valued, such as America's persistent streak of racism, its materialism, and its excessive and isolationist nationalism.”<sup>40</sup> This is an important observation, because, as will be discussed below, there are certain American social problems that have drawn recurrent criticism in Baha'i texts. For instance,



the problem of racism in the United States is termed, in the Baha'i Writings, as "the most challenging issue." In an official position statement issued in 1991 by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States<sup>41</sup>—entitled, *The Vision of Race Unity: America's Most Challenging Issue*—the problem of racism in America is framed so:

Racism is the most challenging issue confronting America. A nation whose ancestry includes every people on earth, whose motto is *E pluribus unum*, whose ideals of freedom under law have inspired millions throughout the world, cannot continue to harbor prejudice against any racial or ethnic group without betraying itself. Racism is an affront to human dignity, a cause of hatred and division, a disease that devastates society. Notwithstanding the efforts already expended for its elimination, racism continues to work its evil upon this nation.

The American audience is in full view here, where racism is characterized as fundamentally un-American, facially contradicting America's celebrated motto, which translates, "Out of many, One." Therefore, unity is faithful to the America ideal, whereas racism tears at America's social fabric. America has no spiritual destiny so long as rampant racism remains. The persistence of racism, even in its most subtle forms (what sociologists have termed, "polite racism"), retards America's social advancement, and vitiates its moral authority under the close watch of the community of nations. Further in this statement, the National Spiritual Assembly connects the fostering of racial harmony—seen as the divinely ordained antidote to racism—with the destiny of America:

Aware of the magnitude and the urgency of the issue, we, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, speaking for the entire U.S. Baha'i community, appeal to all people of goodwill to arise without further delay to resolve the fundamental social problem of this country. We do so because of our feeling of shared responsibility, because of the global experience of the Baha'i community in affecting racial harmony within itself, and because of the vision that the sacred scriptures of our Faith convey of the destiny of America.

America's prospective leadership in international affairs must be grounded in domestic social policy that other nations may regard as exemplary and as a model to follow. Of course, this cannot happen unless and until America succeeds in eradicating racism and promoting interracial harmony. Stockman registers one more point: "In this way the sacred history becomes a spur to Baha'i efforts to reform society. It also helps American Baha'is to form an American identity that is congruent with the Baha'i scriptures."<sup>42</sup> In other words, if America solves its racial crisis at home, it will then gain the moral authority to promote similar social cohesion abroad.

## The Baha'i Emancipation/Civil War Myth

The year 1912 was the year that 'Abdu'l-Baha came to America. On just his tenth day in America—Saturday, April 20—'Abdu'l-Baha arrived in Washington, D.C., and stayed until Sunday, April 28. On Tuesday morning, April 23, 'Abdu'l-Baha spoke in Rankin Chapel at Howard University. Well over a thousand faculty, administrators, students, and guests<sup>43</sup> crowded the relatively small space of this modest chapel to hear him speak. In this historic speech, 'Abdu'l-Baha draws on American history (or a certain view of it) in order to promote unity between the races: "The first proclamation of emancipation [the Emancipation Proclamation] for the blacks was made by the whites of America. How they fought and sacrificed until they freed the blacks! Then it spread to other places." 'Abdu'l-Baha further states that the Emancipation Proclamation was followed by the Europeans, and had a liberating impact on Africans as well, such that "Emancipation Proclamation became universal."<sup>44</sup>

In this general statement, 'Abdu'l-Baha evidently points to some of the political and social effects of the Emancipation Proclamation (and its later developments) as a reflex of American exemplarism abroad, as well as at home. To idealize the Civil War is to mythologize it. Here, 'Abdu'l-Baha mythologizes the Civil War by essentializing it. This Civil War myth, like most myths, serves as a vehicle of a social and moral truth: the need for interracial unity. 'Abdu'l-Baha's observations, as quoted above, had their basis in later developments in the Civil War and beyond.

On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was promulgated—although Lincoln arguably had no constitutional authority to actually free slaves. (By dint of his authority as commander in chief, the Proclamation was technically a military order.) Its reach was not universal, as it legally freed slaves only in the Southern states. The Emancipation Proclamation was the precursor of the Thirteenth Amendment. On December 18, 1865, Congress's Thirteenth Amendment freed slaves nationally. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery, and thus radically altered the U.S. Constitution, as part of what some legal scholars call the "Second Constitution." Ironically, ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment marks the first time that the word "slavery" appeared in the Constitution, even though the Constitution had explicitly protected slavery. 'Abdu'l-Baha's statement, therefore, would presumably adumbrate the Thirteenth Amendment as an extension of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.

Originally known as the "Abolition Amendment," the intent of the Thirteenth Amendment was to give practical effect to the Declaration of Independence's self-evident truths "that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Of course, such unalienable rights did not extend to aliens (noncitizens), which is why the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) had, perforce, to precede the Fifteenth, by granting citizenship to anyone born or naturalized in the United States.

Under Section 2, which legal scholars call the Enforcement Clause, the Thirteenth Amendment was also supposed to eradicate any vestiges of forced labor (“badges and incidents of servitude”). Thus, to enforce the Thirteenth Amendment, Congress quickly passed the Civil Rights Act of 1866 (over President Andrew Johnson’s veto), the Slave Kidnapping Act of 1866, the Peonage Act of 1867, and the Judiciary Act of 1867. But a series of Supreme Court decisions during Reconstruction effectively emasculated the Amendment, through crabbed interpretation and curtailed application. With the splendid exception of peonage cases, the Thirteenth Amendment remained a dead letter under segregationist Supreme Court rulings like *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which used color as a badge for discrimination while professing an “equal but separate” doctrine. One reason for this is that the Thirteenth Amendment was deficient in that it lacked any formal recognition of equality under the law. This defect would later be cured by enactment of the Equal Protection Clause under the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Thirteenth Amendment is far more than an emancipation law. Through its enforcement power, it is also a civil rights instrument, although rarely used. The social transformation that the framers of the Thirteenth Amendment had envisioned could only be achieved where the federal government could enforce freedom. Sadly, it took over a century for the Supreme Court to discover in the Thirteenth Amendment a fresh constitutional source of power for enforcing certain civil rights. The landmark decision of *Jones v. Alfred H. Mayer Co.*, 392 U.S. 409 (1968), restored the civil rights value of the Amendment and transformed it into a potentially potent civil rights instrument. *Jones* established Congress’s power to enact legislation against private racial discrimination. Today, the Thirteenth Amendment arguably remains a little-used, but potentially important, federal power for enforcing civil rights against all vestiges of slavery that reincarnate as racial discrimination. Alexander Tsesis, who may be today’s leading authority on the Thirteenth Amendment, observes that each new generation must reexamine the nation’s past, its core documents, and its moral progress as a constitutional democracy.

Such legislation, alone, cannot solve the racial crisis that continues to affect America, even though such discrimination has taken on subtle forms—what sociologists generally term, “polite racism.” Abolition of slavery, after all, is not freedom from all oppression. Slavery’s roots are deep in American history, and are not yet fully extirpated. Racism is a ghost of the slaver’s psyche, and legislation alone cannot humanify the heart. Baha’i texts are fully alive to this problem, which is why, according to ‘Abdu’l-Baha, whites should “endeavor to promote your advancement and enhance your honor,” referring to African Americans. “Differences between black and white will be completely obliterated; indeed, ethnic and national differences will all disappear.”<sup>45</sup> There is an element of prophecy in ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s prediction that racial, ethnic, and national differences would, in the future,

vanish as socially repugnant. Just about any prophecy requires mechanisms for its fulfillment. Accordingly, ‘Abdu’l-Baha invites his audience to build on history by making history, in commencing a new era of racial harmony.

On Wednesday, April 24, 1912—the day after speaking in Rankin Chapel at Howard University—‘Abdu’l-Baha said, at a Baha’i-sponsored interracial meeting: “A meeting such as this seems like a beautiful cluster of precious jewels—pearls, rubies, diamonds, sapphires. It is a source of joy and delight. In the clustered jewels of the races, may the blacks be as sapphires and rubies and the whites as diamonds and pearls. How glorious the spectacle of real unity among mankind! This is the sign of the Most Great Peace; this is the star of the oneness of the human world.” Throughout his travels and speaking engagements in the United States and Canada, ‘Abdu’l-Baha continued to stress the vital importance of race unity for America and for the world.

### The Baha’i Wilsonian Myth

In the Baha’i vision of America, America’s world role is to foster ideal international relations. Such world diplomacy and international cooperation will, in turn, prove hugely instrumental in unifying the world (which, after all, is the principal purpose of the Baha’i Faith). In its religious myth (or, sacred history) of America, several Baha’i texts single out, for distinction, an American president who tried to do exactly that: Woodrow Wilson. Indeed, President Wilson was a “statesman whose vision both ‘Abdu’l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi have praised.”<sup>46</sup> These passages lionize President Woodrow Wilson by focusing exclusively on his legacy as an internationalist. Such praise is both deserved and controversial. Wilson is immortalized in history as an internationalist who championed the formation of the League of Nations (precursor of the United Nations). Historians generally agree that Woodrow Wilson, in so doing, was the first U.S. president to define America’s world role. This largely explains why Baha’i sources attach considerable religious significance to President Wilson. Yet Wilson was also a racist, which fact finds no purchase in the Wilsonian idealism given such prominence in Baha’i texts. Shoghi Effendi states that Wilson holds a special place as the most honored statesman in the Baha’i writings:

To her President, the immortal Woodrow Wilson, must be ascribed the unique honor, among the statesmen of any nation, whether of the East or of the West, of having voiced sentiments so akin to the principles animating the Cause of Baha’u’llah, and of having more than any other world leader, contributed to the creation of the League of Nations—achievements which the pen of the Center of God’s Covenant [‘Abdu’l-Baha] acclaimed as signaling the dawn of the Most Great Peace.<sup>47</sup>

Note that the passage distinguishes this American president as “the immortal Woodrow Wilson,” notwithstanding the fact that Wilson was an erstwhile racist. While racism is absolutely antithetical to Baha’i principles of unity, the Baha’i Woodrow Wilson myth is consistent with the function of mythmaking in general, which is to confer meaning and inspire action. Myths, after all, are about storytelling in order to moralize and incentivize, not to memorialize the naked facts for their own sake. Here, the purpose of idealizing the past is to inspire an ideal future.

In a word, Wilsonian idealism is internationalism.<sup>48</sup> A comparison of Wilsonian idealism and Baha’i principles shows a powerful resonance that is nothing short of resounding harmonics. Stephen Skowronek condenses and characterizes Wilsonian idealism as effectively as any of his predecessors have done, if not more so:

“Peace without victory”; self-determination; the equality of states; renunciation of indemnities and annexations; rejection of the balance of power; promotion of the community of powers, of collective security under a league of nations, of a world safe for democracy—these were the principles Wilson enunciated in 1917, and these were the principles that catapulted him into the top ranks of democratic visionaries in world history.<sup>49</sup>

On these resonances between Wilsonian internationalism and Baha’i principles of ideal international relations leading to world unity, ‘Abdu’l-Baha, observed: “As to President Wilson, the fourteen principles which he hath enunciated are mostly found in the teachings of Baha’u’llah and I therefore hope that he will be confirmed and assisted.”<sup>50</sup> In ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s estimation, Wilson’s enlightened internationalism attracted divine favor:

The President of the Republic, Dr. Wilson, is indeed serving the Kingdom of God for he is restless and strives day and night that the rights of all men may be preserved safe and secure, that even small nations, like greater ones, may dwell in peace and comfort, under the protection of Righteousness and Justice. This purpose is indeed a lofty one. I trust that the incomparable Providence will assist and confirm such souls under all conditions.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, in the Baha’i view, President Wilson’s principles of internationalism were providentially inspired. According to Shoghi Effendi, the “ideals that fired the imagination of America’s tragically unappreciated President” were “acclaimed as signaling the dawn of the Most Great Peace” by “‘Abdu’l-Baha, through His own pen.”<sup>52</sup>

Such is the Wilsonian myth. Yet the Baha’i writings do not idealize Wilson so much as they champion Wilsonian idealism.<sup>53</sup> In lionizing Wilson the statesman, and in overlooking Wilson the racist, the Baha’i Wilsonian

myth lives up to the purpose of a religious myth of America, as idealized or sacralized history exemplifying key precepts and practices.

## The Baha'i Vision of the Destiny of America

In 2001, there came a moment in time when the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States (elected governing council of the American Baha'i community) decided to offer *a perspective on the destiny of America as the promoter of world peace*. At a time of national crisis following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the National Spiritual Assembly published a full-page display ad, "The Destiny of America and the Promise of World Peace," which appeared on page A29 in the *New York Times* on December 23, 2001.<sup>54</sup> This 645-word document highlights six prerequisites for world peace: (1) promoting "universal acceptance" of the oneness of humanity to realize world peace; (2) eradicating racism ("a major barrier to peace") to achieve racial harmony; (3) fostering "the emancipation of women" to achieve "full equality of the sexes"; (4) greatly reducing the "inordinate disparity between rich and poor"; (5) transcending "unbridled nationalism" and inculcating "a wider loyalty" to "humanity as a whole"; (6) overcoming "religious strife" to enjoy harmony among religions.<sup>55</sup> The full-page display ad was later reprinted in dozens of newspapers around the country.

While the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks are not explicitly mentioned in the proclamation, they are implied in the words, "At this time of world turmoil."<sup>56</sup> How true this statement was. Americans, particularly, were still in a state of shock. America, under direct attack, was understandably alarmed. Thus "9/11" was, and remains, a deeply disturbing experience for the American nation. If the American Baha'is had anything to say, this was the time to say it: "The United States Baha'i community," the ad goes on to say, "offers a perspective on the destiny of America as the promoter of world peace."<sup>57</sup>

This Baha'i proclamation introduces the American public to "Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i Faith," who, "addressing heads of state, proclaimed that the age of maturity for the entire human race had come." This refers to what the present writer calls *the first international peace mission in modern history*. The proclamation of Baha'u'llah took place primarily in the years 1867–1870. During this time, Baha'u'llah addressed epistles, *inter alia*, to Kaiser Wilhelm I, Tsar Alexander II, Emperor Napoleon III, Pope Pius IX, Queen Victoria, Emperor Franz Joseph, Sultan Abdul-Aziz, and the king of Iran, Nasiri'd-Din Shah. Speaking of the peace proposals and principles of ideal international relations that Baha'u'llah communicated to the reigning pontiff and potentates, 'Abdu'l-Baha (Baha'u'llah's eldest son, successor, and interpreter), commented: "These precepts were proclaimed by Baha'u'llah many years ago. He was the first to create them

in the hearts as moral laws. Writing to the sovereigns of the world, he summoned them to universal brotherhood, proclaiming that the hour for unity had struck—unity between countries, unity between religions.”<sup>58</sup> The Baha'i Faith promotes peace as a direct extension of the fact that its founder, Baha'u'llah, dedicated his life to the cause of world peace and promulgated the principles necessary to achieve it.

The *Times* display ad places Baha'u'llah's messages to the kings and rulers of the world in this perspective: “The unity of humankind was now to be established as the foundation of the great peace that would mark the highest stage in humanity's spiritual and social evolution. Revolutionary and world-shaking changes were therefore inevitable.” “The Destiny of America and the Promise of World Peace” goes on to quote the following passage from the Baha'i Writings:

The world is moving on. Its events are unfolding ominously and with bewildering rapidity. The whirlwind of its passions is swift and alarmingly violent. The New World is insensibly drawn into its vortex. . . . Dangers, undreamt of and unpredictable, threaten it both from within and from without. Its governments and peoples are being gradually enmeshed in the coils of the world's recurrent crises and fierce controversies. . . . The world is contracting into a neighborhood. America, willingly or unwillingly, must face and grapple with this new situation. For purposes of national security, let alone any humanitarian motive, she must assume the obligations imposed by this newly created neighborhood. Paradoxical as it may seem, her only hope of extricating herself from the perils gathering around her is to become entangled in that very web of international association which the Hand of an inscrutable Providence is weaving.<sup>59</sup>

This passage in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, by Shoghi Effendi, who, as “Guardian” of the Baha'i Faith, led the Baha'i world from 1921 to 1957, is part of a lengthy letter written December 25, 1938, to the Baha'is of the United States and Canada.<sup>60</sup> Here, the Guardian states that America will be so inextricably drawn into the vortex of international relations that she will be forced to assume a leadership role in the international community, not out of any humanitarian motives per se, but purely out of enlightened political self-interest. Notwithstanding, that enlightened self-interest will, in time, develop into an enlightened global interest.

The National Spiritual Assembly goes on to forecast the destiny of America as a future leader and catalyst of world peace:

The American nation, Baha'is believe, will evolve, through tests and trials to become a land of spiritual distinction and leadership, a champion of justice and unity among all peoples and nations, and a powerful servant of the cause of everlasting peace. This is the peace promised by God in the sacred texts of the world's religions.<sup>61</sup>

However, the six prerequisites to world peace, mentioned above, must first be met.

This public message from the American Baha'i leadership to the American people was a significant public gesture. The message goes on to quote from a Baha'i prayer for America: "May this American Democracy be the first nation to establish the foundation of international agreement. May it be the first nation to proclaim the unity of mankind. May it be the first to unfurl the standard of the Most Great Peace." The proclamation closes on an optimistic note, with this heartening word of encouragement: "During this hour of crisis," the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States concludes, "we affirm our abiding faith in the destiny of America. We know that the road to its destiny is long, thorny and tortuous, but we are confident that America will emerge from her trials undivided and undefeatable." With this message of hope and inspiration, the National Spiritual Assembly offers a fresh perspective on America that charts its destiny, prioritizes its social agenda, and conveys a forward-looking sense of purpose and resolve.

As previously stated, a number of passages in Baha'i texts address the destiny of America. One of these statements, apart from its exhortative tenor, contains a significant allusion to an earlier moment in Baha'i history:

This nation so signally blest, occupying so eminent and responsible a position in a continent so wonderfully endowed, was the first among the nations of the West to be warmed and illuminated by the rays of the Revelation of Baha'u'llah, soon after the proclamation of His Covenant on the morrow of His ascension.<sup>62</sup>

The allusion to what took place "soon after" may be a reference to the first public mention of the Baha'i Faith in America, which took place during the World's First Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893, commemorating the four-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America.<sup>63</sup> The paper, entitled "The Religious Mission of the English Speaking Nations," was presented on September 23, 1893.<sup>64</sup> While the paper was written by the Reverend Henry Harris Jessup, D.D. (1832–1910), Director of Presbyterian Missionary Operations in North Syria, it was George A. Ford, a longtime missionary to Sidon (in Syria), who read the paper on Jessup's behalf. The paper was part of a full day of addresses on the theme "Criticism and Discussion of Missionary Method."<sup>65</sup> This historic public reference to the fledgling Baha'i religion is as follows:

In the palace of Behjeh, or Delight, just outside the fortress of Acre, on the Syrian coast, there died a few months since a famous Persian sage, the Babi Saint, named Behâ Allah—the "Glory of God"—the head of a vast



reform party of Persian Moslems, who accept the New Testament as the Word of God and Christ as the deliverer of men, who regard all nations as one, and all men as brothers. Three years ago he was visited by a Cambridge scholar and gave utterances to sentiments so noble, so Christ-like, that we repeat them as our closing words:

“That all nations should become one in faith and all men as brothers; that the bonds of affection and unity between the sons of men should be strengthened; that diversity of religion should cease and differences of race be annulled; what harm is there in this? Yet so it shall be. These fruitless strifes, these ruinous wars shall pass away, and the ‘Most Great Peace’ shall come. Do not you in Europe need this also? Let not a man glory in this, that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind.”<sup>66</sup>

America’s future destiny was presaged by its finest moments in the past. Shoghi Effendi credits America with having played a preponderant role in both World Wars:

This nation, moreover, may well claim to have, as a result of its effective participation in both the first and second world wars, redressed the balance, saved mankind the horrors of devastation and bloodshed involved in the prolongation of hostilities, and decisively contributed, in the course of the latter conflict, to the overthrow of the exponents of ideologies fundamentally at variance with the universal tenets of our Faith.<sup>67</sup>

As favorable an estimate as this is, Shoghi Effendi elsewhere portends a fire by ordeal:

The American nation . . . will find itself purged of its anachronistic conceptions, and prepared to play a preponderating role, as foretold by ‘Abdu’l-Baha, in the hoisting of the standard of the Lesser Peace, in the unification of mankind, and in the establishment of a world federal government on this planet. These same fiery tribulations will not only firmly weld the American nation to its sister nations in both hemispheres, but will through their cleansing effect, purge it thoroughly of the accumulated dross which ingrained racial prejudice, rampant materialism, widespread ungodliness and moral laxity have combined, in the course of successive generations, to produce, and which have prevented her thus far from assuming the role of world spiritual leadership forecast by ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s unerring pen—a role which she is bound to fulfill through travail and sorrow.<sup>68</sup>

Note that this “world spiritual leadership forecast by ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s unerring pen” will only come about after America experiences upheaval

and consequent social transformation. It will not come easily. It has to be earned. America has to learn the hard way. What has prevented America from assuming a spiritual leadership role is its “ingrained racial prejudice, rampant materialism, widespread ungodliness and moral laxity.” Elsewhere, Shoghi Effendi revoices these same criticisms of America, which was “immersed in a sea of materialism, a prey to one of the most virulent and long-standing forms of racial prejudice, and notorious for its political corruption, lawlessness and laxity in moral standards.”<sup>69</sup> These are retardant conditions that must first be palliated by equal and opposite conditions of racial harmony, spirituality, godliness, and moral rectitude. This is where religion in general, including the Baha’i Faith, can and should act as a catalyst in the moral and spiritual regeneration of America as a precondition to its ability to live up to its destiny, in the Baha’i view of it, described by Shoghi Effendi in this signal passage:

Then, and only then, will the American nation . . . be in a position to raise its voice in the councils of the nations, itself lay the cornerstone of a universal and enduring peace, proclaim the solidarity, the unity, and maturity of mankind, and assist in the establishment of the promised reign of righteousness on earth. Then, and only then, will the American nation, while the community of the American believers within its heart is consummating its divinely appointed mission, be able to fulfill the unspeakably glorious destiny ordained for it by the Almighty, and immortally enshrined in the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Baha. Then, and only then, will the American nation accomplish “that which will adorn the pages of history,” “become the envy of the world and be blest in both the East and the West.”<sup>70</sup>

While the destiny of America is well established in Baha’i texts, one extended analysis of it is that of John Huddleston. As the International Monetary Fund’s former chief of the Budget and Planning Division, British economist John Huddleston has contributed an analysis of the Destiny of America theme that runs through selected Baha’i texts, such as those cited above.<sup>71</sup> According to Huddleston, “The Baha’i view of the spiritual destiny of America is a logical development of the traditional American dream. It foresees a leadership role for America in the achievement of both the Lesser Peace and the Most Great Peace.”<sup>72</sup>

The “Lesser Peace” and the “Most Great Peace” are Baha’i terms that envision stages in the process of world peace, leading from the first efforts to covenant and codify international law to the full-blown emergence of world commonwealth of nations. The establishment of world peace will “be a gradual process” leading “at first to the establishment of that Lesser Peace which the nations of the earth, as yet unconscious of His Revelation and yet unwittingly enforcing the general principles which He has enunciated, will themselves establish.”<sup>73</sup> The next stage is “the spiritualization of the

masses, consequent to the recognition of the character, and the acknowledgement of the claims, of the Faith of Baha'u'llah."<sup>74</sup> This is "the essential condition" that will serve as the foundation for the "ultimate fusion of all races, creeds, classes, and nations."<sup>75</sup> On this foundation will the "Most Great Peace" be established. The Most Great Peace may be described as a future golden age in which "a world civilization be born, flourish, and perpetuate itself, a civilization with a fullness of life such as the world has never seen nor can as yet conceive."<sup>76</sup>

The Most Great Peace is not only about establishing a world commonwealth but is associated with establishing the Kingdom of God on earth, meaning the realization of Baha'i principles and ideals throughout the world, and the emergence of the Baha'i Faith as the world religion of the future. In so saying, a fundamental premise of the Faith is the "oneness of religion." This means that all of the major world religions (and others lost to history) are iterations of the one Faith of God—that is, all revealed religions, in their pristine forms, are reflections of eternal spiritual reality as suited to the needs of humanity from age to age. Under the corollary doctrine of "Progressive Revelation," the principles and teachings of the Baha'i Faith are held to be ideally suited to this day and age, as well as into the foreseeable future. Features of the Most Great Peace will be highlighted at the end of this chapter.

In a cablegram dated April 26, 1942, Shoghi Effendi presaged America's lion's share in helping establish the Lesser Peace: "The great Republic of the West is inescapably swept into the swelling tide of the world tribulations, presaging the assumption of a preponderating share in the establishment of the anticipated Lesser Peace."<sup>77</sup> Exactly how this will come about is not clear: "The distance that the American nation has traveled since its formal and categorical repudiation of the Wilsonian ideal," writes Shoghi Effendi, alluding to Congress's refusal to join the League of Nations, is

to every Baha'i observer, viewing the developments in the international situation, in the light of the prophecies of both Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha, most significant, and highly instructive and encouraging. To trace the exact course which, in these troubled times and pregnant years, this nation will follow would be impossible.<sup>78</sup>

Yet there is a shared understanding among Baha'is as to America's capacity to assume a "preponderating share" in bringing the Lesser Peace into being.

America will also have a central role in bringing about the Most Great Peace, according to the Baha'i view of the future. "Whatever the Hand of a beneficent and inscrutable Destiny has reserved for this youthful, this virile, this idealistic, this spiritually blessed and enviable nation . . .," Shoghi Effendi asserts, "we may, confident in the words uttered by 'Abdu'l-Baha, feel assured that that great republic . . . will continue to evolve, undivided and undefeatable, until the sum total of its contributions to the birth, the

rise and the fruition of that world civilization, the child of the Most Great Peace and hallmark of the Golden Age of the Dispensation of Baha'u'llah, will have been made, and its last task discharged.”<sup>79</sup>

These words are far more than prediction: they are spoken with religious conviction and with absolute confidence in their fruition.

“Indeed, the most important quality America brings to the world scene,” Huddleston observes, “is its sheer capacity to get things done.”<sup>80</sup> Even more significant than “American know-how” and its “can-do” capabilities is the historic quality of the American experience itself, and its moral impact on other countries. Huddleston notes the worldwide influence of the Civil Rights movement (“the spark that illumined the world”) and how it has further prepared America for its world role: “In short, beyond the model of the U.S. Constitution is an inheritance in the American political experience of an immense struggle to implement its true spirit through application of a systematic approach to human rights—an experience that is surely not matched in intensity by any other nation.”<sup>81</sup> Shoghi Effendi articulates those distinctively American qualities that endow it with the capacity to realize its spiritual destiny:

To the matchless position achieved by so preeminent a president [Woodrow Wilson] of the American Union, in a former period, at so critical a juncture in international affairs, must now be added the splendid initiative taken, in recent years by the American government, culminating in the birth of the successor of that League [the United Nations] in San Francisco, and the establishment of its permanent seat in the city of New York. Nor can the preponderating influence exerted by this nation in the councils of the world, the prodigious economic and political power that it wields, the prestige it enjoys, the wealth of which it disposes, the idealism that animates its people, her magnificent contribution, as a result of her unparalleled productive power, for the relief of human suffering and the rehabilitation of peoples and nations, be overlooked in a survey of the position which she holds, and which distinguishes her from her sister nations in both the new and old worlds.<sup>82</sup>

Note here the outspoken recognition of the outstanding qualities and capacities that America possesses: international influence, economic and political power, prestige, wealth, idealism, productivity, and altruism. And so, given these recognized qualities, capacities, and potentialities, the Baha'i writings are remarkably clear in their vision of America's mission and destiny. There are, however, great challenges facing the American nation that Baha'i texts directly address. These are social deficits the solution of which will directly impact America's moral authority in terms of its world role. Among these social ills is racism, which is as persistent and pervasive as it is historic. “Racism is the most challenging issue confronting America” is the opening sentence in *The Vision of Race Unity*, an official Baha'i statement

published in 1991. Racism, in Baha'i analysis, is the original sin of America. (Many historians would agree.) Race unity is therefore a key to America's social salvation.

*The Vision of Race Unity* statement integrates racial harmony with America's destiny, as the two are coefficient with each other:

Aware of the magnitude and the urgency of the issue, we, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, speaking for the entire U.S. Baha'i community, appeal to all people of goodwill to arise without further delay to resolve the fundamental social problem of this country. We do so because of our feeling of shared responsibility, because of the global experience of the Baha'i community in effecting racial harmony within itself, and because of the vision that the sacred scriptures of our Faith convey of the destiny of America.

Thus, throughout the United States, Baha'is actively promote a message of race unity, equality of women and men, and other teachings that can help make America a better place.

Religious communities are proper objects of scientific study, where their professions may literally be measured against their actual practices. Like other faith-communities, Baha'is have faith that an ideal can become real. The efficacy of these Baha'i endeavors have been documented in several sociological studies, such as in the 2006 monograph, *The Equality of Women and Men: The Experience of the Baha'i Community of Canada*, by Deborah K. van den Hoonaard, Canada Research Chair in Qualitative Research and Analysis at St. Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick, and Will C. van den Hoonaard, Professor at the University of New Brunswick and author of *Walking the Tightrope: Ethical Issues for Qualitative Researchers*.<sup>83</sup> On the race relations front, doctoral research on the Baha'i community of Atlanta, Georgia, revealed that "nearly one-fourth were black or African American," which is a significant demographic finding given the problem of self-segregation in American religious settings. The author of that study, a social scientist, observed that Baha'i efforts to promote race unity in Atlanta "inform African American Baha'is in a way that Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malcolm X cannot."<sup>84</sup>

In fine, the destiny of America is to play a preponderating role in the political process of establishing the Lesser Peace, as well as to lead all nations spiritually in an evolutionary process culminating in the Most Great Peace and a great world civilization. This future golden age is spoken of in glorious terms by Shoghi Effendi, whose vision of it reads, in condensed part, as follows:

- The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Baha'u'llah, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united . . .

- This commonwealth must . . . consist of a world legislature . . .
- A world executive, backed by an international Force, will . . . apply the laws enacted by this world legislature . . .
- A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise . . .
- A mechanism of world inter-communication will be devised . . .
- A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization . . .
- A world language . . . will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue.
- A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures . . . will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations . . .
- Science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will coöperate, and will harmoniously develop . . .
- The press will . . . cease to be mischievously manipulated by vested interests, whether private or public . . .
- The economic resources of the world will be organized . . . and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated . . .
- Racial animosity and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding and coöperation . . .
- The causes of religious strife will be permanently removed . . .
- The inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated . . .
- Universal recognition of one God and . . . allegiance to one common Revelation—such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving.<sup>85</sup>

One cannot be but struck by the sheer scope, grandeur, and maturity of this vision. It would appear that America—once successful in its mission in taking a leading role in bringing about world unity, which will develop in stages and progress as a gradual process—will gracefully become part of the framework of the world federation of nations that it has helped shape. A great catalyst in this process will be the burgeoning influence of Baha’i principles that will further animate the progressive outlook of world leaders.

Obviously none of this will happen by magic. One might well ask: How will this noble vision ultimately be realized in the realm of the mundane? How will all this be expected to come about? The short, but not simple, answer is this: Beyond its emphasis on egalitarian social principles, the Baha’i Faith’s grand vision of world unity necessarily requires a human spiritual transformation at the levels of the individual and community is needed in order to put those principles into practice, involving “the spiritualization of human consciousness and the emergence of the global civilization.”<sup>86</sup>

Overcoming racism and other social evils clearly requires both policy and personal change. Here, precept and praxis go hand-in-hand. Baha’i

principles of unity will be effective only to the degree that they are put into practice, both individually and collectively. The role of Baha'is in America is to purify the inward life of their own community, to assail the racism and other social evils in the American nation at large, and to offer in practice and principle the Baha'i vision of world unity.<sup>87</sup> This is concurrent with the international relations role of America in establishing the Lesser Peace, a process that has little to do with Baha'i efforts.

In the full-page display ad, "The Destiny of America and the Promise of World Peace," which appeared on page A29 in the *New York Times* on December 23, 2001,<sup>88</sup> the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States quotes from a Baha'i prayer for America, revealed by 'Abdu'l-Baha, the full text of which is as follows:

O Thou kind Lord! This gathering is turning to Thee. These hearts are radiant with Thy love. These minds and spirits are exhilarated by the message of Thy glad-tidings. O God! Let this American democracy become glorious in spiritual degrees even as it has aspired to material degrees, and render this just government victorious. Confirm this revered nation to upraise the standard of the oneness of humanity, to promulgate the Most Great Peace, to become thereby most glorious and praiseworthy among all the nations of the world. O God! This American nation is worthy of Thy favors and is deserving of Thy mercy. Make it precious and near to Thee through Thy bounty and bestowal.<sup>89</sup>

Here, this Baha'i "Prayer for America" envisions America's world role, which is "to upraise the standard of the oneness of humanity, to promulgate the Most Great Peace." In their complementary role as a spiritualizing and socially leavening influence, the American Baha'is—individually and collectively—strive to do their part in realizing this noble vision. As Baha'i philosopher Alain Locke (1895–1954) has said:

America's democracy must begin at home with a spiritual fusion of all her constituent peoples in brotherhood, and in an actual mutuality of life. Until democracy is worked out in the vital small scale of practical human relations, it can never, except as an empty formula, prevail on the national or international basis. Until it establishes itself in human hearts, it can never institutionally flourish. Moreover, America's reputation and moral influence in the world depends on the successful achievement of this vital spiritual democracy within the lifetime of the present generation. (Material civilization alone does not safeguard the progress of a nation.) Baha'i Principles and the leavening of our national life with their power, is to be regarded as the *salvation of democracy*. In this way only can the fine professions of American ideals be realized.<sup>90</sup>



*Figure 12.2.* Jenny Manybeads, a Diné (Navajo) Baha'i, embraced the Baha'i Faith in the 1950's. At the age of 100, she is pictured here, in 1984, in front of her hogan (traditional Navajo sacred home of wooden poles, tree bark and mud) in Dinnebito, Arizona. Rug weaver, herbalist, and midwife, Manybeads was affectionately called the "Grandmother of Big Mountain." She passed away on November 3, 1999, at the age of 115.

(Photo courtesy of David Smith.)



## Chapter 12 Update: America and the “Golden Age” of Future World Civilization

*This nation [America] so signally blest, occupying so eminent and responsible a position in a continent so wonderfully endowed, . . . may well claim to have, as a result of its effective participation in both the first and second world wars, . . . saved mankind the horrors of devastation and bloodshed involved in the prolongation of hostilities . . .*

*Nor can the preponderating influence exerted by this nation [America] in the councils of the world, the prodigious economic and political power that it wields, the prestige it enjoys, the wealth of which it disposes, the idealism that animates its people, her magnificent contribution, as a result of her unparalleled productive power, for the relief of human suffering and the rehabilitation of peoples and nations, be overlooked in a survey of the position which she holds, and which distinguishes her from her sister nations in both the new and old worlds.*

—Shoghi Effendi (June 5, 1947)<sup>91</sup>

America, in the Baha'i text above, exerts “preponderating influence” in world affairs.

True enough. But what about America's future?

The year 2012 marked the centenary of 'Abdu'l-Baha's historic visit to America and Canada. Baha'i communities across North America hosted special events in commemoration of 'Abdu'l-Baha's 239-day speaking tour in 1912. By commemorating events that happened 100 years ago, participants had the opportunity to take stock of progress made so far, and of work yet to be done. At this time, many Baha'is revisited the remarkable statements by 'Abdu'l-Baha and the role that America could prospectively play in furthering the social evolution of the planet. America, with its political, economical, scientific, and military might (not to mention its cultural influences as well), is in an ideal position to carry on its leadership role within the international community, where multilateral partnerships, exchange, reciprocity, and other forms of cooperation can make a significant difference in the course of world affairs.

That same year, Robert Stockman published an insightful retrospective history, *'Abdu'l-Baha in America*.<sup>92</sup> Then, in 2013, Palgrave Macmillan published a multi-author work, *'Abdu'l-Baha's Journey West: The Course of Human Solidarity*, including an article contributed by the present writer, “'Abdu'l-Baha's 1912 Howard University Speech: A Civil War Myth for Interracial Emancipation.”<sup>93</sup> By its subtitle, the reader is introduced to the concept of “interracial emancipation.” This unfamiliar term invites explanation. Considering that racism is a psychological and social disease that affects both perpetrator and victim (albeit in different ways), not only does the victim of racism need to be freed, psychologically as well as socially, so also the

perpetrator needs to be emancipated from what could well be analyzed as a personality disorder that has become a character disorder when acted out.

This honored guest, 'Abdu'l-Baha, complimented his host, America, in an extraordinary way, as Shoghi Effendi highlights:

“May this American democracy,” He Himself, while in America, was heard to remark, “be the first nation to establish the foundation of international agreement. May it be the first nation to proclaim the unity of mankind. May it be the first to unfurl the standard of the ‘Most Great Peace’. . . . The American people are indeed worthy of being the first to build the tabernacle of the great peace and proclaim the oneness of mankind. . . . May America become the distributing center of spiritual enlightenment and all the world receive this heavenly blessing. For America has developed powers and capacities greater and more wonderful than other nations. . . . May the inhabitants of this country become like angels of heaven with faces turned continually toward God. May all of them become servants of the omnipotent One. May they rise from their present material attainments to such a height that heavenly illumination may stream from this center to all the peoples of the world. . . . This American nation is equipped and empowered to accomplish that which will adorn the pages of history, to become the envy of the world and be blest in both the East and the West for the triumph of its people. . . . The American continent gives signs and evidences of very great advancement. Its future is even more promising, for its influence and illumination are far-reaching. It will lead all nations spiritually.”<sup>94</sup>

These words are far from empty flattery. Nor are they pious hopes or wishful thinking. They are pregnant with meaning. They are as much mandates as they are predictions. Their fulfillment is anticipated by Baha'is. Yet the circumstances under which the necessary conditions may be met require elucidation that, at best, must remain speculative. Where and when, one may ask, were these statements regarding the spiritual destiny of America made? One by one, their sources are as follows:

1. *“May this American democracy be the first nation to establish the foundation of international agreement. May it be the first nation to proclaim the unity of mankind. May it be the first to unfurl the standard of the ‘Most Great Peace’.”* This mission statement, in which 'Abdu'l-Baha expressed his vision of America, was made on April 20, 2012, when 'Abdu'l-Baha addressed the Orient-Occident-Unity Conference, held in the Public Library Hall, Washington, D.C.<sup>95</sup> Shoghi Effendi has edited the words slightly (such as “unity” in place of “universality”) from the notes taken by Joseph H. Hannen of the contemporaneous translation given on that occasion. On the same occasion, 'Abdu'l-Baha continued: “The American people are indeed worthy of being the first to build the tabernacle of the great peace and proclaim the oneness of mankind.”

2. "May America become the distributing center of spiritual enlightenment and all the world receive this heavenly blessing. For America has developed powers and capacities greater and more wonderful than other nations." The occasion was 'Abdu'l-Baha's talk at the Hotel Ansonia in New York on April 16, 1912. The text is based on a transcription of the English translation by Mirza Ahmad Sohrab, which conveys 'Abdu'l-Baha's prophetic benediction: "May the inhabitants of this country become like angels of heaven with faces turned continually toward God. May all of them become servants of the omnipotent One. May they rise from their present material attainments to such a height that heavenly illumination may stream from this center to all the peoples of the world."<sup>96</sup>
3. "This American nation is equipped and empowered to accomplish that which will adorn the pages of history, to become the envy of the world and be blest in both the East and the West for the triumph of its people."<sup>97</sup> Here, the occasion was a speech by 'Abdu'l-Baha on May 6, 1912 at Euclid Hall in Cleveland, Ohio. Shoghi Effendi has substituted "people" in place of "democracy," which probably captures the gist of the original more faithfully than the wording of the stenographic notes of the English translation given at that time.
4. "The American continent gives signs and evidences of very great advancement. Its future is even more promising, for its influence and illumination are far-reaching. It will lead all nations spiritually."<sup>98</sup> These momentous words (based on the notes by Sigel T. Brooks of the contemporaneous translation) were uttered on the very same day, but at a different venue in Cleveland. This talk took place at the Sanatorium of Dr. C. M. Swingle,<sup>99</sup> located at 2120 Prospect Avenue in Cleveland (or, alternatively, at 8203 Wade Park Avenue N.E.). Dr. Swingle graduated from the Cleveland Homeopathic College in 1908 and, in 1909, was affiliated with the McFadden Sanatorium (the "Bernarr Macfadden Healthatorium") in Chicago.<sup>100</sup>

Based on this source-critical analysis, the foregoing quotations are Abdu'l-Baha's statements in the original Persian language, the contemporaneous English translations of which were recorded and are best characterized as "reported utterances." That is to say, the English translations may or may not be *verbatim* representations of 'Abdu'l-Baha's original discourses in Persian.

However, the gist is considered accurate whenever authenticated by Shoghi Effendi, under this operative principle: "The Universal House of Justice has asked us to affirm that the utterances of 'Abdu'l-Baha quoted in the writings of the Guardian can be taken as authentic."<sup>101</sup> Apparently, this is an exception to the general rule elsewhere enunciated by Shoghi Effendi: "Nothing can be considered scripture for which we do not have an original text."<sup>102</sup> On the basis of this principle, the authentication by citation by Shoghi Effendi is one of purport—in which the statement is confirmed as historically accurate—even if that citation may or may not be a translation of the original words *verbatim*.

Thus ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s prophecy that America “will lead all nations spiritually” is considered authentic. The question remains as to what this statement means, and how (and when) this prediction will come true.

Baha’i teachings on the destiny of America are prophetic in two ways. Not only do they *foretell* America’s future world role, they *forthtell* how America can best live up to its world role in promoting world peace and prosperity. The former depends on the latter. Before revisiting the Baha’i vision of America’s mission, a brief comment on what is meant by “prophecy” will prove useful.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “prophecy,” first and foremost, is “that which is done or spoken by a prophet; the action or practice of revealing or expressing the will or thought of God or of a god; divinely inspired utterance or discourse.” This leads, in turn, to the more popular notion of “prophecy,” i.e., “the action of foretelling or predicting the future; prediction, prognostication; an instance of this, a prediction.” So a prophecy is not simply a mantic vaticination or portent of future events. Rather than a crystal ball, such “second sight” is foresight driven by insight. The future is a consequence of the present.

Fulfillment of prophecy does not come about happenstance. The conditions perforce must be ripe and right for anything of consequence to occur. So, in order for America to be a world leader and a catalyst for bringing about a sea change in international relations, America itself must take up that mission self-consciously. In other words, how can America help bring about world unity, unless and until America sees itself as instrumental in bringing about that goal? That, in itself, presupposes a vision of world unity as something desirable.

## The Baha’i Vision of World Unity

In the first edition, this chapter closed with a quote from Baha’i philosopher, Alain Locke, who said: “Baha’i Principles and the leavening of our national life with their power, is to be regarded as the *salvation of democracy*. In this way only can the fine professions of American ideals be realized.”<sup>103</sup> On September 13, 2014, Dr. Locke was honored in a special ceremony hosted by the American Association of Rhodes Scholars, in which his cremated ashes—stored for decades in the archives at Howard University—were, at long last, interred, with honor and distinction, at the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, DC. A nine-pointed star—a symbol of Baha’i identity—was engraved on the of Locke’s dignified headstone.<sup>104</sup> In a way, this chapter update is something of a commentary on how Baha’i principles can contribute, in their own way, to ideally realizing “the fine professions of American ideals” in order to achieve the “salvation of democracy” by way of material and spiritual interventions.

Baha’i teachings call on America to play a leadership role in promoting “world patriotism.” Asking America, as a nation, to actively engage in

promoting ideal international relations is really a call to all nations to do so, as their respective resources and commitments permit. America simply has a greater capability, given its unique role as the world's superpower, America, therefore, should do its part in helping usher in an era where America itself will no longer even need to play a leadership role once the infrastructure of world self-government, through a federation of nations, is put in place. Such infrastructures of world self-governance would (or should) be tasked with the primary responsibility of overseeing conflict resolution, of eradicating of extremes of wealth and poverty, of safeguarding political, economic, religious, and cultural rights, and of promoting harmonious relations within and between nations, races, religions, and genders, etc.

One way to foster unity is to break down barriers and to bridge divides. As Baha'i philosopher, Alain Locke, said: "No more progressive step can be made in our present civilization than the breaking down of the barriers which separate races, sexes and nations" (1930).<sup>105</sup> The Baha'i paradigm of world unity has recently been analyzed, in the form of a typology (or systematic classification) as follows:

#### FIFTY BAHAI PRINCIPLES OF UNITY

I. INDIVIDUAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD: (1) "Mystic Feeling which Unites Man with God"; II. FAMILY RELATIONS: (2) Unity of Husband and Wife; (3) Unity of the Family; III. INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS: (4) Oneness of Emotions; (5) Spiritual Oneness; IV. GENDER RELATIONS: (6) Unity of the Rights of Men and Women; (7) Unity in Education; V. ECONOMIC RELATIONS: (8) Economic Unity; (9) Unity of People and Wealth; VI. RACE RELATIONS: (10) Unity in Diversity; (11) Unity of Races; VII. ENVIRONMENTAL RELATIONS: (12) Unity of Existence (Oneness of Being and Manifestation); (13) Unity of Species; (14) Unity with the Environment; VIII. INTERFAITH RELATIONS: (15) Unity of God; (16) Mystic Unity of God and His Manifestations; (17) Unity of the Manifestations of God; (18) Unity of Truth; (19) Unity Among Religions; (20) Peace Among Religions; IX. SCIENTIFIC RELATIONS: (21) Unity of Science and Religion; (22) Methodological Coherence; (23) Unity of Thought in World Undertakings; X. LINGUISTIC RELATIONS: (24) Unity of Language; XI. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: (25) Unity of Conscience; (26) Unity in Freedom; (27) Evolving Social Unities; (28) Unity in the Political Realm; (29) Unity of Nations; (30) Unity of All Mankind/World Unity; (31) Unity of the World Commonwealth; (32) Unity of the Free; XII. BAHAI RELATIONS: (33) Unity of the Baha'i Revelation; (34) All-Unifying Power; (35) Unity of Doctrine; (36) Unity of Meaning; (37) Baha'i Unity; (38) Unity among Baha'i Women; (39) Unity in Religion; (40) Unity of Station; (41) Unity of Souls; (42) Unity in Speech; (43) Unity in [Ritual] Acts; (44) Unity of Baha'i Administration; (45) Unity of Purpose; (46) Unity of Means; (47) Unity of Vision; (48) Unity of Action; (49) Unity of the Spiritual Assembly; (50) Unity of Houses of Justice and Governments.<sup>106</sup>

This paradigm, while comprehensive, is not exhaustive. It illustrates the local-to-global importance of unity, from “individual to international relations.” This is a special contribution of Baha’i teachings to contemporary religious thought and practice.

## America’s World Role—As a Dual Role

In the Baha’i view, America has a salvific purpose in the greater scheme of things. This “destiny” is not a given, as necessary conditions must be met in order for America’s destiny to be fully realized. Such rhetoric is more motivational than it is clairvoyant. Baha’i pronouncements regarding America have a dual focus. One is on America as a nation. The other is on the American Baha’i community. The contributions of both are considered vital to progress toward world peace and prosperity.

The Baha’i vision of America has secular and religious dimensions. The secular dimension views America within the “Major Plan of God” leading to the “Lesser Peace” (a political peace among the nation-states of the world). The religious dimension views the American Baha’i community as part of the “Minor Plan of God” culminating in the “Most Great Peace” (a spiritual world commonwealth).

In fine, the Baha’i vision of America is that it will be “prepared to play a preponderating role, as foretold by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in the hoisting of the standard of the Lesser Peace, in the unification of mankind, and in the establishment of a world federal government on this planet” by “assuming the role of world spiritual leadership forecast by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s unerring pen.”<sup>107</sup> In short, America will contribute to the rise of a world civilization which, in the fullness of time, will bring about a Golden Age.

The fact that Baha’i texts, previously cited, point to a greater potential for America to exert influence in the world in a spiritually significant way—just as America has done politically, scientifically, and economically—should not imply that America has any special distinction apart from its obvious potential. It is America’s capacity that the Baha’i writings seek to inspire and potentialize. Ideally, the special contribution of the Baha’i Faith, in essence, is to promote the consciousness of human solidarity. Ideally, the special contribution of America, as a nation, is to apply that consciousness to the political, economic, and scientific tasks at hand. America, if it realizes its potential and arises to fulfill its God-given purpose, will realize its destiny, from the Baha’i perspective, in the following way:

Whatever the Hand of a beneficent and inscrutable Destiny has reserved for this youthful, this virile, this idealistic, this spiritually blessed and enviable nation [America], however severe the storms which may buffet it in the days to come in either hemisphere, however sweeping the changes which the impact of cataclysmic forces from without, and the stirrings of

a Divine embryonic Order from within, will effect in its structure and life, we may, confident in the words uttered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, feel assured that that great republic—the shell that enshrines so precious a member of the world community of the followers of His Father—will continue to evolve, undivided and undefeatable, until the sum total of its contributions to the birth, the rise and the fruition of that world civilization, the child of the Most Great Peace and hallmark of the Golden Age of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, will have been made, and its last task discharged.<sup>108</sup>

America, as a nation, and the American Baha'i community, cannot accomplish these goals alone. World peace and unity are global objectives requiring universal participation. The best, and most, that America can do is to do its part—and to inspire the rest of the world to do its part as well.

## **How America's Parallel Roles Intersect**

America's world role is obviously independent of the Baha'i community which, in any case, prescinds from partisan politics (which Baha'is consider divisive and therefore judiciously avoid). As previously pointed out, President Woodrow Wilson was the first to clearly establish America's world role as a matter of foreign policy. The Baha'i writings honor President Wilson for his contribution to the eventual formation of the United Nations, which rose like a Phoenix on the ashes of its predecessor, the League of Nations. As also stated earlier, Baha'i texts not so much honor President Woodrow Wilson individually as they do his legacy of "Wilsonian idealism" in general, and, in particular, Wilsonian internationalism as it relates to America's world role. This may be illustrated by a second authentic prayer for America, an authorized translation of which was released by the Universal House of Justice and subsequently published in 2017:

### **A PRAYER FOR THE CONFIRMATION OF THE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT**

O my God! O Thou Who endowest every just power and equitable dominion with abiding glory and everlasting might, with permanence and stability, with constancy and honour! Aid Thou by Thy heavenly grace every government that acteth justly towards its subjects and every sovereign authority, derived from Thee, that shieldeth the poor and the weak under the banner of its protection.

I beseech Thee, by Thy divine grace and surpassing bounty, to aid this just government, the canopy of whose authority is spread over vast and mighty lands and the evidences of whose justice are apparent in its prosperous and flourishing regions. Assist, O my God, its hosts, raise aloft its ensigns, bestow influence upon its word and its utterance, protect its lands, increase its honour, spread its fame, reveal its signs, and unfurl its

banner through Thine all-subduing power and Thy resplendent might in the kingdom of creation.

Thou, verily, aidest whomsoever Thou willest, and Thou, verily, art the Almighty, the Most Powerful.<sup>109</sup>

The original Arabic text is available online.<sup>110</sup> A memorandum, “Prayers for America” (July 20, 2017) by the Research Department (an agency of The Universal House of Justice) accompanying the newly-authorized translation states: “The prayer in question is authentic, and its original Arabic text is held in the Archives at the Bahá’í World Centre. The manuscript includes the following heading in English: ‘A Prayer for the confirmation of the American Government.’” When the two Baha’i prayers for America are read together, then America’s ideal world role is clear: for America to “lead all nations spiritually” (as foretold by ‘Abdu’l-Baha on May 6, 1912, in Cleveland) and for God to “bestow influence upon its word and its utterance,” America must “upraise the standard of the oneness of humanity” and “promulgate the Most Great Peace,” as urged by ‘Abdu’l-Baha in his other prayer for America, given on April 30, 1912, in Chicago.

Shoghi Effendi’s clear pronouncements on America’s spiritual destiny are grounded not only in statements, both oral and written, by Abdu’l-Baha, but also in statements attributed to Baha’u’llah:

[T]he Rulers of America were not only spared the ominous and emphatic warnings which He [Baha’u’llah] uttered against the crowned heads of the world, but were called upon to bring their corrective and healing influence to bear upon the injustices perpetrated by the tyrannical and the ungodly. To this remarkable pronouncement, conferring such distinction upon the sovereign rulers of the Western Hemisphere, must be added not only the passages in which the Author of our Faith [Baha’u’llah] clearly foreshadows the revelation of the “signs of His dominion” in the West, but also the no less significant verbal affirmations which, according to reliable eye-witnesses, He more than once made in regard to *the glorious destiny which America was to attain in the days to come*.<sup>111</sup>

Here, Shoghi Effendi confirms that Baha’u’llah spoke more than once of “the glorious destiny which America was to attain in the days to come.” That said, America will not change the world by itself. To succeed, unilateral initiatives can best serve as a catalyst for securing multilateral agreements, raising the resources and steeling the resolve needed to follow through in constructing the infrastructures that can serve as the thew and sinew of a global system that can act equitably to effectively adjudicate international conflicts and arbiter mutually favorable outcomes.

Baha’u’llah created an institution for for the purpose of helping bring about world peace. This Baha’i institution is known as the Universal House of Justice. First elected by Baha’i representatives worldwide in 1963, the



Universal House of Justice acts pursuant to an explicit mandate. Baha'u'llah called upon the Universal House of Justice to promote world peace. In Baha'i parlance, this is referred to as the "Lesser Peace," which is distinct from the "Most Great Peace." In the *Tablet of the World* (1891), Baha'u'llah states:

Whilst in the Prison of 'Akká, We revealed in the Crimson Book that which is conducive to the advancement of mankind and to the reconstruction of the world. The utterances set forth therein by the Pen of the Lord of creation include the following which constitute the fundamental principles for the administration of the affairs of men:

First: It is incumbent upon the ministers of the House of Justice to promote the Lesser Peace so that the people of the earth may be relieved from the burden of exorbitant expenditures. This matter is imperative and absolutely essential, inasmuch as hostilities and conflict lie at the root of affliction and calamity.<sup>112</sup>

While the Universal House of Justice was ordained by Baha'u'llah as the international governing body of the Baha'i community, even now laying the groundwork for the Most Great Peace to come in the future, Bahá'u'lláh also called upon the House of Justice to promote the Lesser Peace, a political peace among nations. How the Universal House of Justice is supposed "to promote the Lesser Peace" is not explicitly spelled out. It presupposes some degree of respect and influence in the international community. Presumably, the role of the House of Justice is an advisory one. It may be called upon by governments in a purely consultative capacity. It is worth noting that, on the occasion of the 1986 International Year of Peace, the Universal House of Justice issued a public statement, "The Promise of World Peace."<sup>113</sup> While addressed "To the Peoples of the World," this statement is directed particularly to world leaders. "The Promise of World Peace" was first presented to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Javier Pérez de Cuellar, on November 22, 1985 by Baha'i dignitary, Ruhyyih Khanum, wife of the late Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, Shoghi Effendi. Currently, the worldwide Baha'i community is represented in the United Nations through its nongovernmental organization (NGO), the Baha'i International Community (BIC), which has offices in New York, Geneva and Brussels. Thus it could be said that the Baha'is pursue a form of Wilsonian idealism by their active involvement in the United Nations vis-à-vis the BIC.

Since its initial presentation to the United Nations, "The Promise of World Peace" has been presented to heads of state and government leaders all over the world. At the same time, vigorous grassroots campaigns to disseminate effectively the Baha'i peace message at all possible localities were successfully launched. As a result, several million copies of the document have been personally given by Baha'is to civic and religious leaders as well as to ordinary citizens in most countries. No direct action was expected to ensue from "The Promise of World Peace." Ideally, it would serve as a

catalyst for the comprehensive peace program it articulates. “The Promise of World Peace” may be seen as the official Baha’i contribution to peace literature and to the peace process itself. The document draws attention to the fact that the Baha’i community—itself a social experiment in unity on a grand scale—represents a viable collectivity in which peace-related issues have been raised to the level of principle and creatively implemented.

The Universal House of Justice itself cannot bring about the Lesser Peace. But it can accelerate social forces that lead to international integration. The international Baha’i council nows orchestrates and oversees work that is currently being done at the grassroots level. The Baha’i world, in fact, is undergoing a profound transformation that may be characterized as a paradigm-shift in Baha’i culture and community life. Throughout the world, Baha’is reach out, in their own neighborhoods, to children, junior youth and youth, by organizing children’s classes and “Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programs” for the moral and spiritual education of young people, and to instill in them a strong sense of purpose that is service-oriented. Since this is a universal Baha’i enterprise in which the Baha’is across the world are systematically engaged, it is not specific to the American Baha’i community. These processes are interrelated, as the Baha’i International Community has explained in its statement presented to the Third Nishan Forum on World Civilizations (Shandong University) on May 22, 2014:

The Baha’i International Community is an international non-governmental organization that has been active at the United Nations and other international fora for over 60 years. The Baha’i community’s association with the United Nations dates back to the League of Nations and has its roots in the global vision that animates the teachings of the Baha’i Faith. . . .

As a global community, then, Baha’is are consciously striving to learn how populations of every kind and background can develop the capacity to take charge of their material, intellectual, social and moral development. . . .

Local efforts to improve the well-being of individual neighborhoods, villages and communities carried out by Baha’is and their like-minded collaborators provide key grounding and insight for the Baha’i International Community’s work at the United Nations.<sup>114</sup>

This last paragraph refers to a new paradigm of community-building within the Baha’i world, launched in 1996. Baha’i communities are now organized in “clusters.” Each cluster encompasses communities in reasonable proximity in any given location. The current Baha’i program of community-building is essentially one of introducing spiritual concepts and practices, of developing interpersonal skills and instilling an orientation to community service. This is accomplished through the Baha’i “institute process”—where “institute” refers to the Ruhi Institute and the curriculum of “Ruhi books” that it has produced. One feature of the institute process is the formation of “study circles.”

Participants in study circles are taken through a sequence of Ruhi books that feature brief introductions, key readings, and study questions. The questions are disarmingly simple and may on first impression, strike educated participants as rudimentary. This is because the study circles have been field-tested in rural villages in Third-world countries, to fine-tune the effectiveness of this approach at all levels of society. The program is informed by advanced pedagogy, in theory and practice. The institute process—of forming and facilitating study circles based on a sequence of Ruhi books accompanied by skill-building activities—is essentially a human resource development program.

Typically, the first social skill taught in the Ruhi sequence is that of “home visits.” This is all about connecting hearts through face-to-face interactions that build friendships through acts of caring and sharing. The “home visit” is a surprisingly effective skill at the grassroots level. The sustained practice of home visits broadens the social basis of Baha’i outreach to the wider “community of interest,” i.e., those who have expressed interest in engaging with the Baha’is and their community activities. Home visits are made to Baha’is and non-Baha’is alike. What matters is unity, not affiliation.

Another skill that is cultivated in this sequence of courses is the practice of holding “devotional meetings” in one’s home, in which neighbors and friends are invited to worship together. The advantage of Baha’i worship conducted within homes is that they offer a heartwarming environment.

Another Baha’i community-building practice is hosting neighborhood children’s classes (NCC) in local neighborhoods. In NCCs throughout the world today, children are taught moral and spiritual virtues, which are universal human and social values. Virtues transcend faith-commitments. Baha’i sponsorship of this process, while clearly known to the parents of the children being taught, is not necessarily stressed. Personal transformation is what counts. The Baha’i teachings are simply a vehicle for improving the quality of personal and social life.

Baha’is also establish junior youth groups (JYGs). As a social and economic development project on a world scale, the Baha’i-sponsored “Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programme” helps young people develop spiritual and intellectual capacity, understanding their true identity as noble beings. While themes are explored from a Baha’i perspective, this is not done in the mode of religious instruction. Overseen by the Office for Social and Economic Development at the Baha’i World Centre in Haifa, Israel, JYG “animators” are told, in fact, not to use junior youth groups as a means of direct teaching of the Baha’i Faith. Junior youth groups are led by “animators,” who are typically a mix of youth and adults. Youth are considered essential protagonists in the community-building processes, in which they are taking on every role. In fact, there are a statistically significant number of youth from the wider “community of interest” (outside the Baha’i community), who are serving as JYG animators as well, some of whom have come up through the program themselves.

Engaging in service to one's community is an essential component of junior youth groups, which are all about moral and interpersonal "spiritual empowerment." By assisting the youth to develop in their hearts and minds their sense of purpose, values and commitment to the betterment of self and society, consciousness is raised and the local community is leavened by their influence. A set of beneficial values is instilled in a new generation, as they are equipped to make enlightened choices in life.

These avenues for the moral and ethical education junior youth are essential to the immediate future of Baha'i communities. Such moral and social uplift begins with the seeds of a few individuals in each locality. By cultivating in junior youth a habit of moral and ethical thinking, and of aspiring for a spiritual direction in one's daily life, this program has the power to create transformations at an early age to help shape them into dynamic agents of change. This program, still in its infancy, has untapped spiritual and social potential.

All of the activities described above are advanced through quarterly reflection meetings at the cluster level among all who are participating, for the purpose of learning from experience and formulating specific plans for the next quarter. There are various appointed coordinator roles at the cluster level that facilitate these processes.

The entire approach is coherent and systematic in nature, with an emphasis in developing a "culture of learning" that has a built-in capacity for innovation on an experimental basis. The dynamics of this collective learning system is continually being tested and refined. In the process, developing human capacity for worthwhile service is a cornerstone of this worldwide Baha'i program of outreach and community resource development. There are more than 3,000 clusters around the globe in which this pattern of community-building activities is proceeding in a systematic fashion, including a number of advanced clusters making great progress which have been designated as "learning sites," providing insights for applying their learning elsewhere. Also in advanced clusters, Baha'is engage, at all levels of society, in the prevalent "discourses of society" and in "social action" as well.

Taken together, these efforts progressively advance the work of spiritually empowering children, junior youth and youth, of expanding and consolidating Baha'i communities, of engaging in the public discourses of society, and of initiating social action. This is an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that, through the process of learning from experience, becomes more elaborate over time. This concerted, worldwide endeavor has created a Baha'i culture that systematically learns to think and act in an integrative way.

At the wider community level, Baha'i communities still observe the "Nineteen-Day Feast," in which the members of the Baha'i community come together for worship, consultation, and fellowship. Thus, while there is a primary emphasis on the "core activities" (children's classes, junior youth groups, devotional meetings, and study circles), there is a complement of "essential activities" (Nineteen-Day Feasts, Baha'i Holy Days, etc.), along with Baha'i schools in various regions that offer deepening in various

Baha'i topics of interest, providing edifying enrichment. As the Universal House of Justice wrote in its letter of December 27, 2005: "To maintain focus [prioritizing "core activities"] does not imply that special needs and interests are neglected, much less that essential activities are dropped in order to accommodate others." What all these activities have in common is the process of fostering unity and encouraging service to others.

How does all of this relate back to America's world role, from the Baha'i perspective? By linking ideals and practice, the foregoing description of current Baha'i activities helps make tangible and real what Baha'i individuals, Baha'i communities and institutions are doing to advance the Baha'i vision explained throughout the chapter.

The spiritual destiny of America still inspires the minds and hearts of the America Baha'is. For instance, on December 26, 2014, the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Phoenix, Arizona, opened the 30th Annual Grand Canyon Baha'i Conference with a welcome letter that imparted this message:

'Abdu'l-Baha . . . refers to the America nation as "equipped and empowered to accomplish that which will adorn the pages of history, to become the envy of the world."<sup>115</sup> Friends, fulfilling the destiny of this great nation as prophesied by the Master rests solely on our shoulders. Let us renew our love and our commitment. Let us wholeheartedly support our Institutions. Let us accompany one another. Let us accompany and empower the youth, junior youth and our children to walk the path of service.<sup>116</sup>

America's spiritual destiny, in the Baha'i view, is a two-track process, involving the Major Plan of God (America's domestic and international relations) and the Minor Plan of God (the contribution of the American Baha'i community, at home and abroad). The passage, quoted above, focuses on the latter approach to social transformation. Ideally, the energy of both processes will exhibit splendid moments of synergy in further spiritualizing America.

## Notes

1. Qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1990 [1938]), 87–88. See also 'Abdu'l-Baha, "Talk at Sanatorium of Dr. C.M. Swingle, Cleveland, Ohio, 6 May 1912. Notes by Sigel T. Brooks." *Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1982), 104. ("All the cities of America seem to be large and beautiful, and the people appear prosperous. The American continent gives signs and evidences of very great advancement; its future is even more promising, for its influence and illumination are far-reaching, and it will lead all nations spiritually. The flag of freedom and banner of liberty have been unfurled here, but the prosperity and advancement of a city, the happiness and greatness of a country depend upon its hearing and obeying the call of God." [Emphasis added.]

2. 'Abdu'l-Baha, "Tablet to the Baha'is of the Central States." *Tablets of the Divine Plan* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1993), 79.
3. This claim excludes what historians and phenomenologists of religion call "new religious movements" (NRMs), which properly belong to larger religious categories, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (presented in Chapter 6), which is part of Christianity (marginally so by orthodox standards), or like the Nation of Islam (treated in Chapter 8), which is an Islamic movement based in the United States.
4. Qtd. in and trans. by Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1991 [1936]), 36.
5. Shoghi Effendi, "America and the Most Great Peace." *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, 81.
6. See official announcement, "World Heritage Site: Bahá'í Holy Places." See also Baha'i International Community, "Baha'i shrines chosen as World Heritage sites."
7. Vince Gerasole (CBS), "Rare Wilmette Temple Makes Cut in '7 Wonders' List" (April 30, 2007).
8. Christopher Buck, "The Eschatology of Globalization: Baha'u'llah's Multiple-Messiahship Revisited." *Studies in Modern Religions, Religious Movements and the Babi-Baha'i Faiths*. Ed. Moshe Sharon. *Numen Book Series: Studies in the History of Religions*, 104 (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 143–178; idem, "A Unique Eschatological Interface: Baha'u'llah and Cross-Cultural Messianism." *In Iran*. Ed. Peter Smith (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1986), 157–179.
9. Baha'u'llah, "Queen Victoria." *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 2002), 91.
10. This section is primarily based on a prior publication by the author: Christopher Buck, "Baha'i Faith and Social Action." *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*. Ed. Gary L. Anderson and Kathryn G. Herr (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), vol. 1, 208–213.
11. Baha'i World Centre. "The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: Its Place in Baha'i Literature." *The Baha'i World* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1993), 107.
12. Baha'u'llah. *Tablets of Baha'u'llah Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1978), 67.
13. See Armin Eschraghi, "'Undermining the Foundations of Orthodoxy': Some Notes on the Báb's Sharí'ah (Sacred Law)." *A Most Noble Pattern: Collected Essays on the Writings of the Báb, 'Alí Muhammad Shírází (1819–1850)*. Ed. Todd Lawson and Omid Ghaemmaghami (Oxford: George Ronald, 2012).
14. Universal House of Justice, *The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1973), 5.
15. David B. Barrett, ed., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Study of Churches and Religions in the Modern World, A.D. 1900–2000* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).
16. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks: Addresses given by 'Abdu'l-Baha in Paris in 1911–1912*. 11th ed. (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1969), 159.
17. Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1985), 3–4.
18. Baha'u'llah, "Queen Victoria." *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 2002), 90.
19. *Ibid.*, 92.

20. Baha'i International Community, "Sustainable Development and the Human Spirit." Based on the statement, "The Most Vital Challenge," presented to the Plenary of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, Earth Summit '92).
21. Ibid.
22. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha*. Compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. Translated by Marzieh Gail et al. (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1978), 104.
23. 'Abdu'l-Baha, "5 September 1912. Talk at St. James Methodist Church, Montreal, Canada," *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 318.
24. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1979 [1944]), 396–397.
25. Baha'u'llah, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1992), 52.
26. The author is indebted to Baha'i scholar Peter Terry for compiling this list of heads of state of the Americas, who were contemporary with Baha'u'llah in 1872–1873. E-mail dated September 19, 2008. (Posting on the "Tarikh" listserve.)
27. Shoghi Effendi, *This Decisive Hour: Messages from Shoghi Effendi to the North American Baha'is, 1932–1946* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 2002), paragraph 158.3.
28. Reported by the Baha'i historian Nabil-i-Zarandi, qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 263.
29. Shoghi Effendi, "A God-Given Mandate" (15 June 1946), *Messages to America* (Wilmette, IL: Publishing Trust, 1947), 91; idem, *This Decisive Hour: Messages from Shoghi Effendi to the North American Baha'is, 1932–1946*, paragraph 158.3.
30. Robert Stockman, *The Baha'i Faith and American Protestantism* (Th.D.: Harvard University, 1990). Abstract.
31. Robert Stockman, "Redeemer Nation Revisited: The American Baha'i Sacred History of America." Chapter 7. *The Baha'i Faith and American Protestantism* (Th.D.: Harvard University, 1990), 1. The present writer is grateful to Dr. Stockman for his permission to draw from this chapter in his dissertation. Credit goes to David Merrick, of Edinburgh, Scotland, for providing this chapter by e-mail, with Dr. Stockman's permission. The page numbering used here, however, does not correspond with the completed dissertation.
32. Stockman, "Redeemer Nation Revisited," 1, n. 1.
33. Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).
34. Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 3.
35. Ibid., 2.
36. Ibid., 2.
37. Ibid., 165.
38. Ibid., 165.
39. Stockman, "Redeemer Nation Revisited," 7.
40. Ibid., 17.
41. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States is the annually elected governing council of the American Baha'i community.
42. Stockman, "Redeemer Nation Revisited," 17.

43. Allan L. Ward, *239 Days: 'Abdu'l-Baha's Journey in America* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1979), 40.
44. 'Abdu'l-Baha, "Talk at Howard University, Washington, D.C. (23 April 1912)." Translated by Amin Banani. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*. 2nd ed. (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1982), 45–46.
45. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 46.
46. Louis Auchincloss, *Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2000); A. Clements Kendrick, *Woodrow Wilson: World Statesman* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1987); Thomas J. Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
47. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*. Third printing (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1980), 36.
48. David Steigerwald, *Wilsonian Idealism in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).
49. Stephen Skowronek, "The Reassociation of Ideas and Purposes: Racism, Liberalism, and the American Political Tradition." *American Political Science Review* 100 (2006): 385–401 [396].
50. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1982), 311–312.
51. *Ibid.*, 109.
52. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, 88.
53. Gregory S. Butler, "Visions of a Nation Transformed: Modernity and Ideology in Wilson's Political Thought." *Journal of Church and State* 39.1 (Winter 1997): 37–51
54. National Spiritual Assembly (NSA) of the Baha'is of the United States, "The Destiny of America and the Promise of World Peace." *New York Times* (December 23, 2001): A29.
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Ibid.*
57. *Ibid.*
58. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *'Abdu'l-Baha on Divine Philosophy*. Ed. Isabel Fraser Chamberlain (Boston: The Tudor Press, 1917), 85. While no Persian or Arabic original exists to authenticate this statement recorded in English, its purport is accepted.
59. Qtd. in National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, "The Destiny of America and the Promise of World Peace" (December 23, 2001).
60. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1990 [1938]), 87–88.
61. NSA, "Destiny of America."
62. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith: Messages to America, 1947–1957* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1980), 36–37.
63. Thanks to Steve Cooney of New Zealand for this suggestion. E-mail dated July 26, 2008. (Posting on the "Tarikh" listserv.)
64. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 256.
65. Henry H. Jessup, "The Religious Mission of the English Speaking Nations." *The World's Parliament of Religions: An illustrated and popular story of the world's first Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893*. Vol. 2. Ed. John H. Barrows. Chicago: Parliament Pub. Co., 1893), 1122–1126. Thanks to Reed Breneman for this reference, and



- also for pointing out that it was George A. Ford who read the paper on Jessup's behalf. E-mail dated July 26, 2008. (Posting on the "Tarikh" list-serve.) See review by Eric J. Ziolkowsk, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64.3 (Autumn 1996): 662–664, who notes that the editor of this collection had compared the two variant versions of Jessup's paper to produce a definitive text (663).
66. Jessup, "The Religious Mission of the English Speaking Nations," 1125–1126. These subsequently celebrated words of Baha'u'llah come from Edward G. Browne, "Introduction," in 'Abdu'l-Baha, *A Traveler's Narrative Written to Illustrate the Episode of the Báb*. Trans. Edward G. Browne, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891), 2: xxxix–xl. Robert Stockman points out that "Jessup did not reproduce the quotation exactly as Browne gave it." See idem, *Thornton Chase: The First American Baha'i* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 2001), Chapter 11.
  67. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, 37.
  68. Ibid., 126–127.
  69. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, 19.
  70. Ibid., 90–91.
  71. John Huddleston, "The Spiritual Destiny of America and World Peace." *Processes of the Lesser Peace*. Ed. Babak Bahador and Nazila Ghanea (Oxford: George Ronald, 2002), 107–161.
  72. Ibid., 111.
  73. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come*. Rev. ed. (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1980 [1941]), 123.
  74. Ibid., 123.
  75. Ibid., 123.
  76. Ibid., 123.
  77. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, 55.
  78. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1990), 89.
  79. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, 38.
  80. Huddleston, "The Spiritual Destiny of America and World Peace," 117.
  81. Ibid., 132.
  82. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, 36.
  83. Deborah K. van den Hoonaard and Will C. van den Hoonaard, *The Equality of Women and Men: The Experience of the Baha'i Community of Canada* (Winnipeg, MB: Art Bookbinding, 2006).
  84. Michael McMullen, "The Religious Construction of a Global Identity: An Ethnographic Look at the Atlanta Baha'i Community." *Contemporary American Religion: An Ethnographic Reader*. Ed. Penny Edgell Becker and Nancy L. Eiesland (Walnut Creek, London, New Delhi: Altamira Press, 1997), 236–237 and 227.
  85. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1991 [1936]), 203–204 (formatting added).
  86. *Century of Light*. Prepared under the direction of the Universal House of Justice (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 2001 [2003 printing]), 138.
  87. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, 34.
  88. National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, "The Destiny of America and the Promise of World Peace." *New York Times* (December 23, 2001): A29.

89. 'Abdu'l-Baha, "Prayer for America." *Baha'i Prayers: A Selection of Prayers Revealed by Baha'u'llah, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Baha* (Wilmette, IL: US Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1991), 25.
90. Alain Locke, "America's Part in World Peace" (1925). Qtd. in Christopher Buck, *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2005), 241 (emphasis added). Under the auspices of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, *World Order* magazine has published two special issues on Alain Locke. See Christopher Buck, "Alain Locke: Race Leader, Social Philosopher, Baha'i Pluralist." Special Issue: *Alain Locke: Dean of the Harlem Renaissance and Baha'i Race-Amity Leader. World Order* 36.3 (2005): 7–36; Alain Locke, "Alain Locke in His Own Words: Three Essays" ("The Gospel for the Twentieth Century" [39–42]; "Peace Between Black and White in the United States" [42–45]; "Five Phases of Democracy" [45–48]; Alain Locke, "The Moon Maiden" [37]) *World Order* 36.3 (2005): 37–48 (previously unpublished essays, introduced by Christopher Buck and co-edited with *World Order* editor Dr. Betty J. Fisher); and (2) Christopher Buck and Betty J. Fisher, ed. and intro., "Alain Locke: Four Talks Redefining Democracy, Education, and World Citizenship." *World Order* 38.3 (2006/2007): 21–41. (Alain Locke, "The Preservation of the American Ideal"; "Stretching Our Social Mind"; "On Becoming World Citizens"; "Creative Democracy.")
91. Shoghi Effendi, "The Challenging Requirements of the Present Hour" (June 5, 1947), *Citadel of Faith: Messages to America, 1947–1957* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1980 [1965]), 4–39 [35–36].
92. Robert Stockman, *'Abdu'l-Baha in America* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 2012).
93. Christopher Buck, "'Abdu'l-Baha's 1912 Howard University Speech: A Civil War Myth for Interracial Emancipation." *'Abdu'l-Baha's Journey West: The Course of Human Solidarity*. Ed. Negar Mottahedeh. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 111–144. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9781137032010.0009>. (Accessed November 10, 2014.)
94. 'Abdu'l-Baha, qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, 76–77.
95. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 36.
96. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 19–20.
97. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 103.
98. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 104.
99. Editor's note, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 104.
100. *Cleveland Medical and Surgical Reporter* 17.12 (December 1909): 522.
101. Letter dated June 15, 2000 to an individual, qtd. in a letter by the Universal House of Justice, dated August 20, 2014, to the present writer. By contrast, so-called "pilgrim's notes" (i.e. statements of 'Abdu'l-Baha—or, later, of Shoghi Effendi—reported by Baha'is while on pilgrimage to the Holy Land) can never be authenticated in the absence of an original text.
102. Shoghi Effendi, letter, dated October 24, 1947, to a National Spiritual Assembly. Qtd. in a Memorandum, dated June 5, 2006, by the Research Department, to the Universal House of Justice, Baha'i World Centre. See [http://bahai-library.com/uhj\\_authenticity\\_refresh\\_spirit](http://bahai-library.com/uhj_authenticity_refresh_spirit). (Accessed November 1, 2014.)

103. Alain Locke, "America's Part in World Peace" (1925). Qtd. in Buck, *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy*, 241.
104. Christopher Buck, "Laying a Great Man to Rest—the Final Interment of Alain Locke," BahaiTeachings.org (October 7, 2014); idem, "Sing the Ballad of Alain Locke—Burying the Black Plato," BahaiTeachings.org (October 10, 2014). See <http://bahaiteachings.org/laying-a-great-man-to-rest-final-interment-of-alain-locke> and <http://bahaiteachings.org/sing-the-ballad-of-alain-locke-burying-the-black-plato>. (Accessed November 10, 2014.)
105. Alain Locke, "Locke Holds Smashing of Humanity's Barriers Civilization's Present Need: Howard University Professor Views Elimination of Bars Between Races, Sexes and Nations as Necessity for Progress." *The New York Amsterdam News* (March 26, 1930): 11.
106. Christopher Buck, "50 Baha'i Principles of Unity: From Individual to International Relations." BahaiTeachings.org. See <http://bahaiteachings.org/50-bahai-principles-of-unity-from-individual-to-international-relations>. (Accessed November 1, 2014.) See also Buck, "Fifty Baha'i Principles of Unity: A Paradigm of Social Salvation." *Baha'i Studies Review* 18 (2012). (Published in 2015.) This paper was presented at Princeton University on February 21, 2014. See Buck, "Princeton University: 'Fifty Baha'i Principles of Unity.'" See <http://bahaiteachings.org/princeton-university-fifty-bahai-principles-of-unity>. (Accessed November 1, 2014.)
107. Shoghi Effendi, "American Baha'is in the Time of World Peril" (July 28, 1954), *Citadel of Faith*, 122–132 [126–127].
108. Shoghi Effendi, "The Challenging Requirements of the Present Hour," *Citadel of Faith*, 37–38.
109. 'Abdu'l-Baha, "A Prayer for the confirmation of the American Government." Authorized translation released by The Universal House of Justice. Qtd. in Christopher Buck, "A Baha'i Prayer for the United States Government," BahaiTeachings.org (August 24, 2017), <http://bahaiteachings.org/bahai-prayer-united-states-government>. Accessed August 27, 2017.
110. Original Arabic text (*Muntakhabātī az Makātib-i-Ḥadīrat-i-'Abdu'l-Bahā* 2:313) online: <http://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/ab/MA2/ma2-313.html>.
111. Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1947), 91. (Emphasis added.)
112. Baha'u'llah, "Tablet of the World," *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, 89.
113. Universal House of Justice, "The Promise of World Peace" (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, October 1985).
114. Baha'i International Community, "Contributing to an Ever-Advancing Civilization: The Baha'i International Community and the United Nations" (May 22, 2014). Third Nishan Forum on World Civilizations, Shandong University, Jinan, China. See <https://www.bic.org/statements/Contributing-Ever-Advancing-Civilization-Bahai-International-Community-and-United-Nations>. (Accessed November 16, 2014.)
115. 'Abdu'l-Baha, "6 May 1912, Talk at Euclid Hall, Cleveland, Ohio." See *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 103. (Quotes added.) However, as previously stated, this latter version has the word "democracy" instead of "people" at the end of the sentence.
116. Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Phoenix, Arizona, "Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Phoenix, Arizona," *30th Annual Grand Canyon Baha'i Conference* (December 26, 2014): 3–4 [3].

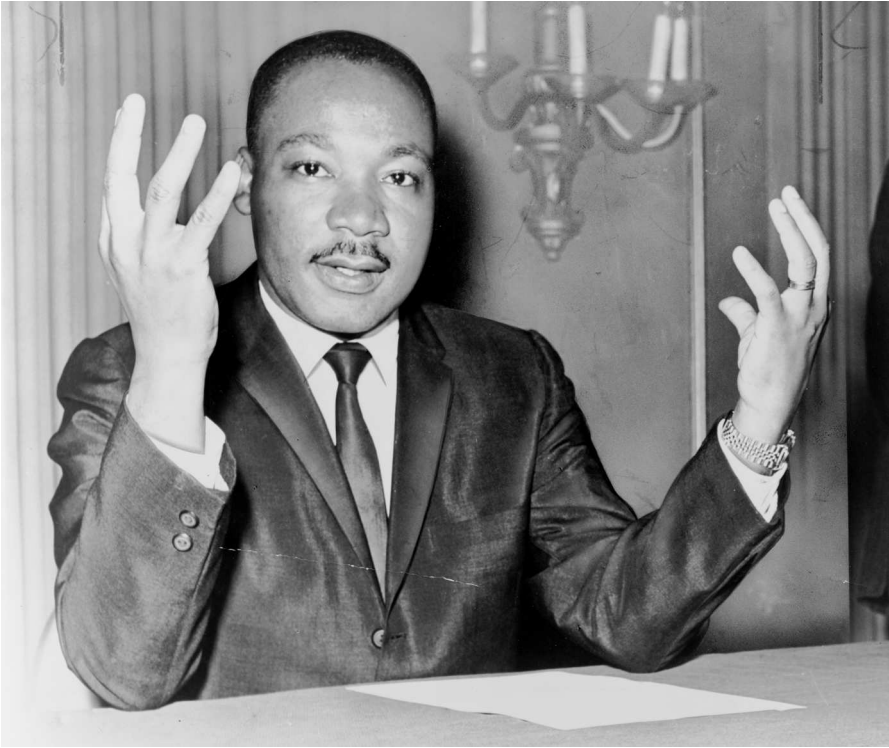


Figure 13.2. “Rev. Martin Luther King,” the Library of Congress caption reads, “head-and-shoulders portrait, seated, facing front, hands extended upward, during a press conference.” In his Nobel Peace Prize Lecture on December 11, 1964, Dr. King famously said:

*This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a big house, a great “world house” in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterners and Westerners, Gentiles and Jews, Catholics and Protestants, Moslem and Hindu, a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interests who, because we can never again live without each other, must learn, somehow, in this one big world, to live with each other.*

(For full text and audio of this historic speech, see [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-lecture.html). Photo by Dick DeMarsico, November 6, 1964. (Public domain. Library of Congress. See <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3c22996>. Accessed January 12, 2015.)

## Chapter 13

# Conclusion: How Minority Faiths Redefined America's World Role

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*Religious institutions play only a modest, indirect role in the development and implementation of foreign policy. But as moral teachers and the bearers of ethical traditions, religious communities can help to structure debate and illuminate relevant moral norms. They can help to develop and sustain political morality by promoting moral reasoning and by exemplifying values and behaviors that are conducive to human dignity.*

—Mark R. Amstutz (2001)<sup>1</sup>

The very notion that America has a world role has its roots in American exceptionalism.

Journalist Michael Barone captured the logic of U.S. exceptionalism when he opened his article in the *U.S. News and World Report's* June 2004 special issue, *Defining America: Why the U.S. Is Unique*, with this oft-quoted line: “Every nation is unique, but America is the most unique.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout American history and in recent world affairs, American exceptionalism—“the perception that the United States differs qualitatively from other developed nations, because of its unique origins, national credo, historical evolution, and distinctive political and religious institutions”<sup>3</sup>—has been a powerful myth indeed. It has functioned as a national creed. How that myth arose in the first place has much to do with the religious origins of America, beginning with the Puritans. How the myth of American exceptionalism has been defined—and will continue to be redefined—must also include the role of religious influences on competing social myths of American nationalism and nationhood. Not until the twentieth century, however, was the myth of American exceptionalism sufficient to define a world role for America beyond exemplarism and “democracy promotion.”

It was President Woodrow Wilson—awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1919—who is almost universally recognized as having first defined America’s world role geopolitically. “Woodrow Wilson . . . can be credited with having been the first to transform American exceptionalism into a universal public good,” writes Edward Kolodziej, “to be enjoyed by all peoples as an outright gift of the American public and to harness American military and economic power to these global objectives of American-dictated world order.”<sup>4</sup> On January 8, 1918, before a joint session of Congress, President Wilson formulated his celebrated “Fourteen Points” for a post–World War I settlement and the establishment of a stable world order. The fourteenth point of Wilson’s visionary proposal called for the formation of a League of Nations: “A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.”<sup>5</sup> In 1919, however, Congress refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, despite an impassioned plea by President Wilson who invoked “the hand of God” at work in the creation of a League of Nations:

It is thus that a new role and a new responsibility have come to this great Nation that we honor and which we would all wish to lift to yet higher levels of service and achievement. The stage is set, the destiny disclosed. It has come about by no plan of our conceiving, but by the hand of God, who led us into this way. It was of this that we dreamed at our birth. America shall in truth show the way. The light streams upon the path ahead, and nowhere else.<sup>6</sup>

Of the Treaty’s 440 articles, the first 26 set forth the Covenant of the League of Nations. Wilson’s plea for the United States to join the League of Nations, however, simply could not overcome the isolationism and narrowing nationalism of his day. Although Wilsonian internationalism has been seen as essentially nationalist by at least one major Wilson biographer,<sup>7</sup> President Wilson was arguably ahead of his time. In 1919, there was little by way of *religious* consensus in support of Wilson’s personal vision. Later in the twentieth century, however, religious influence in favor of America’s world role began to be felt.

As the twentieth century progressed, there was increasing receptivity to the idea that America ought to play a greater role in international affairs—indeed, that America was destined for it, as the global spread of fundamental American values could be instrumental in shaping an emerging world order. In this sense, American internationalism could be thought of as *American exceptionalism universalized*. The time was right. Indeed, the twentieth century was famously described as the “American Century” in 1941 by *Time* magazine publisher Henry Luce, who wrote:

### AMERICA'S VISION OF OUR WORLD

What can we say and foresee about an American Century? . . . [W]hat internationalism have we Americans to offer? . . . It must be a sharing with all peoples of our Bill of Rights, our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, our magnificent industrial products, our technical skills. It must be an internationalism of the people, by the people and for the people.<sup>8</sup>

There is no religious rhetoric here. But the vision of America's world role is expressed with religious conviction.

While religious influences have not had a direct impact on U.S. foreign policy subsequent to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny,<sup>9</sup> religious perspectives have played a part in what Donald White calls "consensus beliefs" and the American "consensus perception of world affairs." White notes the transformative power of a public sense of American national identity: "The origin of the American role in the world was dependent not only on material elements *but also on intangibles.*"<sup>10</sup> White credits the emergence of a belief in America's world role to the power of public consensus: "The United States began its world role because of a consensus in the society over internationalism."<sup>11</sup> White further explains:

The emergence of the world role of the United States in the twentieth century depended on the will of the people. The conversion to an international outlook among the leaders of government and society became accepted by the mass of people of different occupations, home towns, political parties, religions, ethnic groups, and races, who, though divided by their separate interests, adopted *unifying concepts* to bring them together in a collective worldview.<sup>12</sup>

What about the twenty-first century? Can minority faiths collectively provide intangible yet persuasive "consensus beliefs" regarding America's world role? To address this question, a review of the dynamics of religious visions—favored truths animated by the power of religious myths—is instructive. Religious myths and visions of America are essentially *unifying concepts* among the adherents of their respective faith-communities. As such, one can say that the essence of this book can be summed up in three words: *Religions remythologize America*. This summation would be more complete with these three additional words: *Religions re-envision America*. Put together, this book demonstrates that *religions remythologize and re-envision America*.

Here, the way in which religions remythologize and re-envision America requires further explanation. First, the reader will recall that "America" is a figment of the nationalistic imagination in that America is, at once, *nation and notion, country and creed, entity and ideology*. Thus the "idea of America,"

when religiously inspired, can give rise to a progressive religious nationalism that enriches American civil religion. To oversimplify, this is Puritanism pluralized.

However, all is not so bright and rosy in the mythic realm, insofar as America is concerned. Because of this historical and long-standing racial injustice, there are starkly pejorative visions of America as well. In the Nation of Islam, for instance, religious myths and visions of America are dark and foreboding, even catastrophic in outlook. Elijah Muhammad's and Louis Farrakhan's visions of the destruction of America—in an apocalyptic attack by the “Mother Wheel”—are menacing and chilling, not so much for their content as in the fact that people actually believe in the reality of these myths. Surprisingly, these scenarios have taken grip of the minds of not a few Black Muslims, who honestly *believe* these myths. (The present writer has personally met such individuals in Decatur and Springfield, Illinois, from 1997 to 2000.) In other words, these myths have imaginative reality. As a “true lie,” the Mother Wheel myth may be understood and appreciated as a clarion call for America to make a renewed effort to promote racial justice and reconciliation in order to avert the further decay of American society.

This process of remythologizing is in evidence when racial and ethnic notions are brought into play. This study has shown that myths and visions of America can have a decidedly ethnic and racially referenced dimension. For instance, in Chapter 3, American exceptionalism was shown to have largely been the product of Anglo-Saxon ethnogenesis.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the greatness of America, expressed universally—under its nineteenth-century Protestant formulation—was a coded expression of Anglo-Saxon hubris, which, by virtue of the vaunted superiority of the White race, was decidedly exclusive. This overweening ethnonationalism represented a nativist expression of the dominant ethnicity.<sup>14</sup> This should come as no surprise really, for it is quite natural (although, by today's standards, not desirable) when one considers the relationship between ethnicities and nations, as Eric Kaufmann observes: “The nations of the world, almost without exception, were formed from ethnic cores, whose pre-modern myth-symbol complex furnished the material for the construction of the modern nation's boundary symbols and civil religion.”<sup>15</sup> If nations—or, more precisely, nationalisms—were originally ethnic *constructions*, then it stands to reason that the *reconstruction* of nationalisms can be a function of subsequent multiethnic social realities.

From a certain perspective, racism in America can be seen as a historical consequence of privileging the Anglo-Saxon or White race as divinely destined to prosecute the Protestant mission to *colonize, civilize, and Christianize* the entire continent of North America, under the imperialist doctrine of Manifest Destiny. While Manifest Destiny was, at one time, the prevailing vision of America as far as domestic and foreign policy was concerned, Manifest Destiny has since been discredited and is of historical interest only.



The subsequent history of the religious idea of America, therefore, can be analyzed, in part, as an evolution—protracted and painful—in the idea of the place of race and ethnicity in American life, as *religiously valued*. The evolution of American thought, with respect to the idea of America itself, is roughly a progression from religious—and often racial—particularism to universal inclusivism. That is to say, the religious idea of America represents a transformation of Protestant ethnoreligious homogeneity to multiethnic and multireligious plurality, reflecting a direct, albeit delayed and long-overdue, response to America's changing demography and religious landscape. Religious myths of America—true to changed historical circumstances and social dynamics—eventually give way to new myths and visions of America. The process of remythologizing therefore reflects progress in the social evolution of America.

This social evolution, in terms of the broadening mind-set it directionally represents, remains as incomplete as it is perhaps inevitable. To the extent that America succeeds, in time, in overcoming racial limitations will America's world role become a morally authentic enterprise. In that world microcosm and social laboratory known as "America," such a transformation of the American ideal is arguably a major consequence of the influence of minority faiths. The end result is the deconstruction of the Puritan and Anglo-Saxon sense of divine election, but without devaluing the essential mission of America to become a "City upon a Hill"—that is, as an exemplary society that may serve as a social model for other societies to emulate.

Religions remythologize America to the degree that the old myths are rendered obsolete when new myths of America take their place. Generally speaking, one can say that, over time, religious myths and visions of America are largely products of their respective times and places. Within a given religious tradition, there will be change over time, in what Americanists regard as the evolution of American thought. These new myths, therefore, conform to new modes of thinking and valuation as a function of the evolution of American thought.

## Religious Myths and Visions of America Recapitulated

If lessons are to be drawn from American history and thought, then what significance, it may be asked, do religious myths and visions of America have for Americans today? Recall that historian James Moorhead had suggested that the Protestant myth of America—America's master myth—has been reshaped by minority faiths: "But the point is that minority faiths themselves played no small part in the weakening of white Protestant hegemony. Their creativity in adapting and reinterpreting the symbols of American destiny broadened the framework of discourse within which citizens explained national identity."<sup>16</sup> Within this wider framework of discourse, new religious voices are heard and fresh perspectives are gained.

In one sense, the wider framework of discourse of which Moorhead speaks implicates the end result: a universalizing of America's founding principles of equality and egalitarianism, as applied to all of America's constituents.

Of primary interest in this book has been America's "world role." By "world role," as previously stated, is simply meant *the part that America should play in world affairs*. It is time to bring America's world role, from the perspective of minority faiths, into sharper focus, and, perhaps, to take the "latest and greatest" expressions of those perspectives as exemplary. As the times change, so do religions. Therefore, this concluding chapter will recapitulate the more recent visions of America's world role, as respectively held by the minority faiths treated in the preceding pages, with reference also to contemporary Protestant visions of America.

### *Native American Myths and Visions of America*

The original myths and visions of America were from Native Americans themselves, as exemplified by the Iroquois version of the Turtle Island Myth and by the pan-Indian Myth of "Mother Earth." Thus it is clear that religious myths and visions of America have existed ever since the colonial period and, in the case of the Iroquois myth of "Turtle Island," in the precontact period as well. The pan-Native American myth of Mother Earth, in fact, is a somewhat later development, and there is a very real sense in which the Mother Earth myth actually remythologizes the Turtle Island myth by transforming it from a nature-referenced narrative into a more environmentally value-laden perspective. Both myths are nature-based, to be sure, but the Mother Earth myth is more ecologically conscious because it was promoted and popularized as such in the course of its development.

As we are now in the "age of ecology," the "Turtle Island" myth itself is currently one of the great cultural symbols of nature-conscious environmentalism, as is the myth of "Mother Earth." These symbols have been absorbed by American popular culture quite apart from the original Native American context. Both "Turtle Island" and "Mother Earth" are ways of sacralizing (making sacred) the physical environment, or promoting a nature-inclusive spirituality. Because these nature myths have been so successfully and ubiquitously popularized, they now play a conceptual and symbolic role in "greening" other religions in order to promote respect for the environment and inculcate environmentally beneficent behaviors among their adherents. This process has been called the "greening-of-religions phenomenon"<sup>17</sup> and the infusing of "environmental ethics" into traditional religious worldviews.<sup>18</sup> As one illustrative example of the renewed cross-cultural identification of "Turtle Island" with North America, consider poet Gary Snyder's reworking of the America's "Pledge of Allegiance":

I pledge allegiance to the soil of Turtle Island, and to the beings who thereon dwell one ecosystem in diversity under the sun With joyful interpenetration for all.<sup>19</sup>

In 1975, Snyder's 1974 collection of poems, *Turtle Island*, won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1975. The assimilation of the myth (or at least the concept) of Turtle Island (as well as Mother Earth) is a testament to the revitalization and contemporary relevance of a Native American religious myth. Extrapolating from this myth, one can say that, from a Native American religious perspective, America's world role is to promote environmental ethics and ecological sustainability.

The Iroquois Confederacy is generally acknowledged as the first New World democracy. Given this priority in time, the Iroquois myth (or, because of its acknowledged historicity, the "legend") of Deganawida may have had some influence on the shaping of the American republic, although this remains controversial, as the Iroquois Influence Thesis continues to be debated. Is it myth or history? The answers, either way, continue to be hotly contested. Notwithstanding, the reader will recall that, on October 4, 1988, the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.Con.Res. 331—*A concurrent resolution to acknowledge the contribution of the Iroquois Confederacy of Nations to the development of the United States Constitution and to reaffirm the continuing government-to-government relationship between Indian tribes and the United States established in the Constitution*—by a vote of 408–8. By voice vote, the Senate agreed to H.Con.Res. 331 on October 21, 1988. That Congressional resolution reads, in part:

Whereas the original framers of the Constitution, including, most notably, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, are known to have greatly admired the concepts of the six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy; Whereas, the Confederation of the original Thirteen Colonies into one republic was influenced by the political system developed by the Iroquois Confederacy as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the Constitution itself; . . . *Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring)*, That—(1) the Congress, on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the signing of the United States Constitution, acknowledges contribution made by the Iroquois Confederacy and other Indian Nations to the formation and development of the United States.<sup>20</sup>

The reader will also recall that, in 2007, U.S. Representative Joe Baca and U.S. Senator Daniel Inouye, respectively, introduced H.R. 3585 and S. 1852 to the House and Senate, to wit: Native American Heritage Day Act of 2007, "A bill to designate the Friday after Thanksgiving of each year as 'Native American Heritage Day' in honor of the achievements and contributions of Native Americans to the United States." This proposed legislation,

in its current draft, acknowledges the contribution of the Iroquois League of Nations. This draft resolution reads, in part: “Congress finds that . . . the Founding Fathers based the provisions of the Constitution on the unique system of democracy of the six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, which divided powers among the branches of government and provided for a system of checks and balances.”<sup>21</sup> Here, it can definitely be said that “the mystique of Iroquois unity and power had taken on a life of its own.”<sup>22</sup> That the Iroquois influence myth has indeed taken on a life of its own, as the Congressional resolution clearly illustrates, is noted by one scholar so: “Despite the highly speculative nature of the evidence, this misconception has become a shibboleth, one which has been given even the official imprimatur of the United States Senate (United States Congress, Senate Resolution No. 76 [Washington, D.C.: U.S.G.P.O., 1988]).”<sup>23</sup> From this, it can be extrapolated that the Iroquois vision of America is the promotion of the democratic way of life worldwide, in the interests of peace.

### *Protestant Myths and Visions of America*

Today, there are largely liberal expressions of Protestant Christianity that seek to apply Christian principles to the social problems of the day. The idea that Protestant ethics, as it were, can be usefully implemented to improve social conditions can certainly be traced back to the Puritan origins of present-day America. As presented in Chapter 3, the Puritans established what has come to be regarded as the foundational myth of America. Their vision generated the greater—and perhaps grander—Protestant master myth of America: “The Puritans provided the scriptural basis for what we have come to call the myth of America.”<sup>24</sup> Mimicking the style of the prologue of the Gospel of John, the famed Americanist Sacvan Bercovitch characterizes the Puritan myth of America so: “*In the beginning was the word, ‘America,’ and the word was in the Bible, and the word was made flesh in the Americans, this new breed of humans, destined to build a shining city upon a hill.*”<sup>25</sup> Here, Bercovitch’s reference to “City upon a Hill” alludes to the first definitive Puritan discourse on America, “A Modell of Christian Charity” (1630), which is John Winthrop’s speech to his fellow Puritans aboard the *Arbella*, on its voyage across the Atlantic to the Massachusetts coast. This homily was destined to become one of the most powerful, pervasive, and persistent visions of America—the doctrine of American exceptionalism.

Generally, American exceptionalism sees America as a favored nation with a world mission. The Puritans were the first exponents of American exceptionalism. This Puritan myth has five key ideographs: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and *laissez-faire*.<sup>26</sup> These are *civic* American values. There are also *religious* American values, as expressed in ideographs that represent myths. Perhaps the best example of this is John Winthrop’s celebrated ideograph: “Wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the Eies of all

people are upon us.”<sup>27</sup> His biblically literate audience would instantly grasp the allusion to this venerable metaphor in Christ’s “Sermon on the Mount”: “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.” (Matthew 5:14, KJV.) Thus, in 1630, the Puritans constructed a national identity out of their own sense of uniqueness—that is, the Puritans aspired to establish a model society that would serve as a moral exemplar for the world to emulate. Thus, with respect to the Puritan Myth of America, it can be inferred that America’s “world role” (although not expressed in those terms), was to be an exemplar society for all the world to behold, admire, and emulate. Technically, Winthrop’s vision was not of America as a nation (since the United States of America would not be established until the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776), as Godfrey Hodgson is careful to point out: “Most historians would agree that there was no distinctively American consciousness for at least a century after Winthrop’s sermon. Winthrop could not therefore have anticipated that the United States would be as a City upon a Hill.”<sup>28</sup>

For the vanquished, at least, the “Manifest Destiny” Myth was a perversion of the Puritan Myth of America. While some may say that Manifest Destiny is now disguised as hegemonic interests by the world’s only superpower, it has long since been discredited. And while the legacy of “Jim Crow” racism persists in socially subtler forms, the “Curse of Ham” Myth has fallen by the wayside as a discarded myth as well. America’s social sea change from Protestantism to pluralism and from racialism to interracialism, although demographically uneven and institutionally incomplete, was greatly catalyzed by the civil rights movement, which had social implications not only for America but also for the world. The social significance of the civil rights movement for the world at large was best articulated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his prophetic vision of “The World House”:

This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great “world house” in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace. . . . The large house in which we live demands that we transform this world-wide neighborhood into a world-wide brotherhood.<sup>29</sup>

While Dr. King’s promotion of a “world-wide brotherhood” within the “World House” is not representative, much less central, to Protestantism in America generally, it remains as arguably the most prophetic Protestant vision of America. Complementing this world-encompassing vision is America’s mission at home: “King believed that the mission of American Protestantism was not merely to make Christians of all Americans, but to Christianize America.”<sup>30</sup> Perhaps this reading of King is too narrow, in that

King's metaphor of the "World House" is a panoramic vision of interfaith ecumenism.

One of the latest reformulations of Puritan providentialism is Stephen H. Webb's 2004 book, *American Providence: A Nation with a Mission*.<sup>31</sup> *American Providence* is arguably the finest "theology of America" published in recent years. Webb, professor of religion and philosophy at Wabash College, argues that all of history—and the history of each and every nation—should be interpreted providentially. Regarding America itself, Webb holds that God has chosen America, above and beyond all other nations, for a special mission: to complete the Great Commission (spread of the message of Christ throughout the world) by promoting political freedom (that is, the freedom of religion whereby people can freely become Christians) and evangelical Christianity. It is not America *per se* that is intrinsically significant, but its capacity to incarnate Christian virtues within a social order: "The significance of America has to do with what it believes in, not what it is. America is the dream that faith and freedom can be mutually reinforcing within a given social order."<sup>32</sup> Although America has a providential mission and destiny, it is Webb's conviction that Christianity has an even greater destiny in that it will emerge as the world religion of the future: "The destiny of Christianity, however, is much greater than the destiny of America. . . . Christians believe only one globalism will triumph in the end—and that it will be a globalism of the one true God."<sup>33</sup>

### *The Christian Right's Myths and Visions of America*

From a certain perspective, the rise of the Christian Right may be regarded as a response to modernity. Christian conservatism and "secular humanism" are at polar opposites. In this sense, the Christian Right is reactionary. Put another way, the Christian Right may be seen as a "counter-cultural movement" in its vocal opposition to abortion on demand, gay rights, homosexuality, feminism, secular humanism, liberalism, and big government.<sup>34</sup> According to Richard Kyle, the Christian Right has "has simply Americanized the Christian faith."<sup>35</sup> The converse holds true as well. "You name it, they have Christianized it," Kyle hastens to add, citing, as examples, "America's heritage, democracy, market economy, foreign policy, military involvement, and great wealth."<sup>36</sup> In seeing America's political and economic systems as divinely inspired, "evangelicalism has Christianized secular society,"<sup>37</sup> although contemporary America still has a secular core. As such, America's Christian veneer is a thin one, a kind of theological gilding. In a word, the Christian Right has Americanized Christianity and Christianized America. The latter is seen in the myth of America as a "City upon a Hill" and as a "Christian nation." The Christian Right's vision of America, quite simply, is to promote Christian values consistent with America as a Christian country.

### ***Catholic Myths and Visions of America***

Although the Americanist Myth of America was put to an abrupt end by Pope Leo XIII, its legacy continues—not as infallible Catholic doctrine promulgated *ex cathedra*—but as edifying papal *dicta*. Recall that, on April 17, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI said to America:

Today, in classrooms throughout the country, young Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and indeed children of all religions sit side-by-side, learning with one another and from one another. This diversity gives rise to new challenges that spark a deeper reflection on the core principles of a democratic society. May others take heart from your experience, realizing that a united society can indeed arise from a plurality of peoples—“*E pluribus unum*”: “out of many, one”—provided that all recognize religious liberty as a basic civil right.<sup>38</sup>

Here, Pope Benedict XVI has charged America with the task of promoting “religious liberty as a basic civil right,” in the hope that other nations will be inspired by the American model and establish freedom of religion in their own respective societies.

The reader will also recall how, on January 27, 2004, Pope John Paul II received Vice President Dick Cheney, who represented President George W. Bush, and said to him:

Mr. Vice President, . . . I encourage you and your fellow-citizens to work, at home and abroad, *for the growth of international cooperation and solidarity in the service of that peace which is the deepest aspiration of all men and women*. Upon you and all the American people I cordially invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.<sup>39</sup>

No more explicit mandate could be given to America. In a word, America's world role is to promote Catholic values and principles of social justice, at home and abroad.

### ***Jewish Myths and Visions of America***

One of the significant findings of this book is that American Judaism, generally speaking, has fully embraced American values. What Jonathan Sarna calls the “cult of synthesis” might be more positively characterized as a “grand synthesis” of American Judaism and Americanism. Having reviewed the Jewish myth of America as “The Promised Land” and the Jewish “Myth of Columbus” as well, the reader will appreciate how Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Judaism's respective myths and visions of America express elements of “Jewish Americanism” as part of a

social phenomenon that Jonathan Sarna calls the “Cult of Synthesis.”<sup>40</sup> In a very real and practical sense, Jewish Americanism functioned as an ideal survival strategy. Adoption of American values and the enjoyment of protection under the American system of fundamental rights and civil liberties had its advantages, not only for American Judaism at large, but for distinct communities within American Judaism. The American tradition of religious freedom operates to safeguard religious pluralism within American Judaism itself.

Take Reform Judaism, for instance. Founded in 1889, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) is the organized rabbinate (body of rabbis) for Reform Jews in America. In a December 1988 *responsa*, the CCAR declared: “We must now deal with this new state of affairs and support unity and pluralism.”<sup>41</sup> While this is in reference to the divisions within Judaism itself, the principle doubtless generalizes to society as a whole. The reader will recall that the term, “cultural pluralism”—which, of course, adumbrates religious pluralism—was coined by Jewish philosopher Horace Kallen, in conversation with Alain Locke (first African American Rhodes Scholar, “Dean of the Harlem Renaissance,” and “Baha’i philosopher”) at Oxford University in 1907. Pluralism maintains the continued viability of Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Judaism within America, and has been offered as a model for the State of Israel to emulate.

As for America’s world role, this is perhaps best expressed in the Jewish prayer for America, composed by Louis Ginzberg:

May this land, under your providence, be an influence for good throughout the world, uniting all people in peace and freedom—helping them to fulfill the vision of your prophet: “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they experience war any more” (Isaiah 2:4). And let us say: Amen.<sup>42</sup>

Here is a call for America and its people to promote “peace and freedom” throughout the world, in order to make Isaiah’s future vision a present reality.

### ***Mormon Myths and Visions of America***

Of the minority faiths treated in this book, Mormonism arguably has the richest array of America-centered myths. Chapter 6 treated the Mormon Garden of Eden Myth, the Lost Tribes Myth, the Columbus Myth, the Constitution Myth, the Founding Fathers Myth, the Theodemocracy Myth, the America as Zion Myth, and the Mark of Cain Myth. The Garden of Eden was not in the Euphrates Valley of the Old World, but rather in the Mississippi Valley of the New World. From prehistory to modern history, Mormon scriptures present an exalted vision of America. “And for this purpose have



I established the Constitution of this land,” states the Book of Mormon, “by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose,”<sup>43</sup> in reference to America’s Founding Fathers. This short prayer for America is scriptural: “Have mercy, O Lord, upon all the nations of the earth; have mercy upon the rulers of our land; may those principles, which were so honorably and nobly defended, namely, the Constitution of our land, by our fathers, be established forever.”<sup>44</sup> Of these, the Theodemocracy Myth is the one most directly concerned with good governance. Taken together, these Mormon myths synthesize and mythologize distinctively American values, within a complex of equally distinctive Mormon values. These myths are not relics; they are alive and well. The Mark of Cain Myth, however, has been abandoned, although not officially repudiated.

America remains an exalted place, a chosen nation, in the Mormon worldview. As “the land of promise,”<sup>45</sup> America has been “lifted up by the power of God above all other nations, upon the face of the land which is choice above all other lands.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Brigham Young envisioned America’s place in the future golden age to come: “When the day comes in which the Kingdom of God will bear rule, the flag of the United States will proudly flutter unsullied on the flagstaff of liberty and equal rights, without a spot to sully its fair surface.”<sup>47</sup> This, generally, may be seen as America’s world role, in Brigham Young’s conception of it, to promote “liberty and equal rights.”

### *Christian Identity Myths and Visions of America*

The Christian Identity movement is the name attached to what may be described as White nationalism’s collective theology, as promoted by a loosely organized network of white supremacist groups whose presence is primarily maintained in cyberspace on various Internet sites. In Chapter 7, the Two-Seed Myth, the Mud Races Myth, the Lost Tribes Myth, the White Homeland Myth, and the Racial Holy War Myth were presented. In “The Role of Religion in the Collective Identity of the White Racialist Movement,” Iowa State University sociologist Betty A. Dobratz observes that, because the White supremacist movement actually has three competing religions—Christian Identity, the World Church of the Creator (anti-Christian), and neo-pagan Odinism—there is no definitive religious expression of that movement. “Religion could be a crucial ingredient in a group’s identity when the group shares a distinctive religion,” Dobratz writes. “However, in this movement, various religious beliefs are competing, and no one common belief has emerged.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, Christian Identity myths, while distinctive, are not necessarily definitive. To the extent that the Christian Identity movement can be said to have a unified vision of America, it follows that America’s “world role,” if any, is to preserve the purity of the White race and to establish a Whites-only homeland. In its failure to dissociate Whiteness from Christianity, Christian Identity

represents the extreme of religio-racial mythologizing, in the very antithesis of Christian universalism.

### ***Black Muslim Myths and Visions of America***

Like the Mark of Cain Myth in Mormonism, the Yacub Myth, the Mother Wheel Myth, and the Destruction of America Myth have largely been abandoned, although not repudiated. The Nation of Islam, predicated on Black nationalism, formerly entailed what is fair to characterize as “religious racism.” But times are changing, and, over the course of the past three and a half decades, Louis Farrakhan has changed considerably himself.

In his 1993 chapter, “A Vision for America,” Louis Farrakhan proclaimed that America, although not the land of promise for African Americans, had the potential to become so: “The Kingdom of God is an egalitarian kingdom structured on truth, where each of us will be treated with fairness and justice. America could become the basis for the Kingdom of God.”<sup>49</sup> America, although a professedly Christian country, has “missed the message of Christ, or has yet to receive His true message.”<sup>50</sup> This can be achieved, according to Farrakhan, by “righteousness, justice and peace,” which, when practiced, can “form the basis of the Kingdom of God on earth.”<sup>51</sup> However “egalitarian” this message may sound, however, there is a catch. In 2007, in an interview with *The Final Call* newspaper (an official Nation of Islam publication), Farrakhan was asked:

After Saviours’ Day 2007, you delivered a series of spiritual messages under the general title of “One Nation Under God,” culminating with your message “Come Out of Her, My People” delivered at the 12th Anniversary Commemoration of the Million Man March on Oct. 16, 2007 in Atlanta, Ga. What is your statement to Black America about the significance and prophetic meaning of these messages for our survival?

Farrakhan’s answer, although surprising at first to outsiders, should ultimately come as no surprise, given his long-standing patterns of thinking:

Allah (God) knows that we need prayer, but if we don’t separate from an enemy bent on our destruction, prayer alone will not help us to survive. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad points out to us in the scriptures of Bible and Qur’an that the day has arrived for our separation, and the enemy has used integration as a hypocritical trick to make those of us who have been under his foot for 400 years think that our 400-year-old enemy has all of a sudden become our friend. We must wake up to the time and what must be done in such a time. *It is not a time for integration; it is a time for us to separate from our former slave-masters and their children and go for self, do for self, and build a Nation under the Guidance of Almighty God.*<sup>52</sup>

Farrakhan maintains “there can be no peace between us and our former slave masters and their children as long as we do not go along with the status quo. When we demand Justice, Freedom and Equity, we excite the worst in our slave masters and their children.”<sup>53</sup> Speaking of recent hate crimes committed in 2007 “throughout America by evil White people bent on teaching us a lesson,” Farrakhan warns: “We must unite or suffer the consequences, for these events are going to multiply at such a pace that every Black person in America will see the face of a beast that has been masquerading as a friend.”<sup>54</sup> To make matters worse, Farrakhan still adheres to a Jewish conspiracy theory. In the same 2007 interview, Farrakhan said that “the Zionists have worked their way into control in America, Britain, France, Germany and other countries of the world.”<sup>55</sup> As for America itself, in 2007 Farrakhan predicted, in his “absence” (presumably after his death) “you see the horrors of the fall of this Great Mystery Babylon—the United States of America.”<sup>56</sup> Farrakhan, and therefore the Nation of Islam that is still under his shadow, holds a deeply conflicted vision of America, inauthentically promulgated in the name of the religion of Islam—to the extent that religious racism devalues the polished rhetoric of faith-based egalitarianism.

### *Contemporary Muslim Myths and Visions of America*

Before all else, it is important to point out that there is no single Muslim perspective on America. Notwithstanding this fact, America receives considerable criticism from abroad, as the “Great Satan” Myth amply demonstrates. That myth was answered by the opposite and equal “Axis of Evil” counter-myth. In other words, the arrow quickly flew back at the archer, so to speak. The result is reciprocal demonization. Quite expectedly, the Great Satan Myth has created problems for Muslims in America. Is an American Muslim somehow “satanic” by virtue of being a citizen of the “Great Satan”? Reciprocally, are Americans to understand that Islam, as understood in the contemporary Muslim world, intrinsically anti-America? The answer to both rhetorical questions is obviously negative. However, largely as a consequence of American foreign policy considerations, American Muslims are as conflicted about America as they are diverse with respect to their range of “responses to modernity,” as discussed in Chapter 9. By no stretch of the imagination does Radical Islamism represent mainstream Islam. Yet one would hardly reach this conclusion if based on what the popular media represents.

As the “Great Satan,” America has no positive world role from the Radical Islamist perspective. While the “Axis of Evil” counter-myth does imbue America with a world role in promoting democracy and freedom in the Middle East and around the world, this vision arises out of a context completely foreign to the Muslim world. Efforts to dispel the “Great Satan” Myth and to

minimize the fallout from the “Axis of Evil” Myth are focused primarily on the issue of whether America is anti-Islamic or pro-Islamic. As such, America has no positive role even from a moderate Islamic perspective. Might America have a world role from the perspective of “Progressive Islam”?

The most vocal proponent of Progressive Islam is Omid Safi, associate professor of Islamic Studies and Director of Middle East and Islamic Studies at Colgate University, in Hamilton, New York. Co-chair for the Study of Islam Section at the American Academy of Religion, Dr. Safi has edited the 2003 multi-author work, *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*.<sup>57</sup> Progressive Islam is defined, in part, as follows:

Progressive Muslims espouse a critical and non-apologetic “multiple critique” with respect to both Islam and modernity. They are undoubtedly postmodern in the sense of their critical approach to modernity. That double engagement with the varieties of Islam and modernity, plus an emphasis on concrete social action and transformation, is the defining characteristic of progressive Islam today.<sup>58</sup>

As for Safi and the Progressive Muslim movement, there has been some debate about the group in its blurring the line between academic and confessional.<sup>59</sup> Does Safi represent the voices of academics or of “Progressive Muslims” themselves?

“Progressive *ijtihād* (reasoning)” is the hallmark of the movement. As a “global phenomenon,” Safi distances himself and the movement from any explicit association with America, as it “would be a clear mistake to somehow reduce the emergence of progressive Islam to being a new ‘American Islam’.”<sup>60</sup> Safi points to the fact that “Progressive Muslims are found everywhere in the global Muslim *umma* [community].”<sup>61</sup> Because “almost all progressive Muslims are profoundly skeptical of nationalism,” they “instinctively and deliberately reject” and attempt to “transform it into an ‘American Islam’ commodity to be exported all over the world.”<sup>62</sup> They also studiously avoid “appropriation by the United States’ administration, which has used the language of reforming Islam to justify its invasion of Muslim countries such as Iraq.”<sup>63</sup> Proponents of Progressive Islam “promise of ushering in a real paradigm shift in the relationship of Muslims to both Islam and modernity.”<sup>64</sup> Even so, Progressive Islam has not defined a world role for America. To do so would be to defeat the universal outlook and scope of Progressive Islam as a reform movement within the contemporary Muslim world itself.

### ***Buddhist Myths and Visions of America***

Apart from Robert Thurman’s “ten planks” as presented in an appendix in his Buddhist manifesto, *Inner Revolution*, and beyond Daisaku Ikeda’s vision

of the “Second American Renaissance” as heralded in *Songs for America*, what unifies the visions of the Dalai Lama, Robert Thurman, and Ikeda is the goal of establishing democracy on the order of enlightenment principles. According to one commentator, “Buddhist Democracy refers to a parliamentary democracy in which every individual has been awakened to the Principles of Buddhism.”<sup>65</sup> While there is a great difference between Soka Gakkai and Tibetan Buddhism, both are agreed that democracy, enlightened by Buddhist precepts and praxis, combine to form the most potentially ideal form of governance for the world.

In 1991, the Dalai Lama, who has promoted the concept of a “Buddhist Democracy” among his fellow Tibetans, said that “America has the potential to make this world straight.”<sup>66</sup> By this, he meant America’s world role—primarily economically and politically. In 1995, the Dalai Lama further elaborated:

The United States must not underestimate its role in the world today. As Americans you should be proud of your heritage, proud of the values upon which your Constitution is based. Accordingly, you should not shirk from your responsibility to bring those same fundamental rights and freedoms to people living under totalitarian regimes.<sup>67</sup>

In *My Dear Friends in America* (2001),<sup>68</sup> Daisaku Ikeda, President of Soka Gakkai International, writes that social advances that take place in America have global repercussions: “The advance of America is the advance of the world. An inch of growth for America is an inch of growth for the rest of the world. I am convinced that, in the future, America will of necessity become the central stage for the SGI movement.”<sup>69</sup> America’s world role, as a Bodhisattva nation, is to promote Buddhistically enlightened democracy.

### ***Baha’i Myths and Visions of America***

The Baha’i Emancipation/Civil War Myth and the Baha’i Wilsonian Myth are retrospective perspectives within the Baha’i vision of the destiny of America—which vision is primarily prospective in that it is forward-looking, focusing on America’s world role in promoting world unity. The Baha’i Faith defines a world role for America, which is to play a leadership role in creating an emancipatory future for societies globally. However, the Baha’i religion studiously eschews any involvement in partisan politics, which is seen as fundamentally divisive. Baha’is are therefore apolitical, while working with “the body politic” in trying to broaden and heighten “the consciousness of the oneness of mankind”: “In every Dispensation, the light of Divine Guidance has been focused upon one central theme,” writes ‘Abdu’l-Baha. “In this wondrous Revelation, this glorious century, the foundation of the Faith of God and the distinguishing feature of His Law

is the consciousness of the Oneness of Mankind.”<sup>70</sup> One particular Baha’i text develops specific reasons for the spiritual leadership that America has the opportunity and, in a sense, the moral obligation to exercise:

On the other hand is a nation that has achieved undisputed ascendancy in the entire Western Hemisphere, whose rulers have been uniquely honored by being collectively addressed by the Author of the Baha’i Revelation in His Kitáb-i-Aqdas; which has been acclaimed by ‘Abdu’l-Baha as the “home of the righteous and the gathering-place of the free,”<sup>71</sup> where the “splendors of His light shall be revealed, where the mysteries of His Faith shall be unveiled”<sup>72</sup> and belonging to a continent which, as recorded by that same pen, “giveth signs and evidences of very great advancement,”<sup>73</sup> whose “future is even more promising,”<sup>74</sup> whose “influence and illumination are far-reaching,”<sup>75</sup> and which “will lead all nations spiritually.”<sup>76</sup> Moreover, it is to this great republic of the West that the Center of the Covenant of Baha’u’llah has referred as the nation that has “developed powers and capacities greater and more wonderful than other nations,”<sup>77</sup> and which “is equipped and empowered to accomplish that which will adorn the pages of history, to become the envy of the world, and be blest in both the East and the West for the triumph of its people.”<sup>78</sup> It is for this same American democracy that He expressed His fervent hope that it might be “the first nation to establish the foundation of international agreement,” “to proclaim the unity of mankind,” and “to unfurl the Standard of the Most Great Peace,”<sup>79</sup> that it might become “the distributing center of spiritual enlightenment, and all the world receive this heavenly blessing,”<sup>80</sup> and that its inhabitants might “rise from their present material attainments to such a height that heavenly illumination may stream from this center to all the peoples of the world.”<sup>81</sup> It is in connection with its people that He has affirmed that they are “indeed worthy of being the first to build the Tabernacle of the Great Peace and proclaim the oneness of mankind.”<sup>82</sup>

This is a remarkably visionary statement. Observe how Shoghi Effendi’s vision of America goes far beyond a nationalistic civil religion. This vision transcends national boundaries, overleaps vested national interests, and addresses the interests of the widest “body politic”—the planet Earth itself.<sup>83</sup> In addition to the Baha’i Faith’s emphasis on egalitarian social principles, a human spiritual transformation at the levels of the individual and community is needed in order to put those principles into practice. Overcoming racism and other social evils clearly requires both policy and personal change. Here, precept and praxis go hand-in-hand. Baha’i principles of unity will be effective only to the degree that they are put into practice, both individually and collectively.

Among the American Baha’is, it may be said that the Baha’i community has its counterpart of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Baha’i philosopher Dr.

Alain Leroy Locke (1885–1954). Of Locke, Martin Luther King himself said: “We’re going to let our children know that the only philosophers that lived were not Plato and Aristotle, but W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke came through the universe.”<sup>84</sup> Interestingly, Locke developed a philosophy of democracy in nine dimensions. Locke’s grand (though not systematic) theory of democracy sequenced local, moral, political, economic, and cultural stages of democracy as they arced through history, with racial, social, spiritual, and world democracy completing the trajectory. Adjunct notions of natural, practical, progressive, creative, intellectual, equalitarian democracy crystallized the paradigm. Seeing America as “a unique social experiment,” Locke’s larger goal was to “Americanize Americans”<sup>85</sup> and to further democratize democracy itself with the simple yet profound message that equality is the bedrock of democracy: “Eventually, however, just as world-mindedness must dominate and remould [sic] nation-mindedness, so we must transform eventually race-mindedness into human-mindedness.”<sup>86</sup>

The Baha’i perspective on the destiny of America is a singular example of how minority religions, as James Moorhead rightly observed, have contributed and can presently consecrate their own religious myths of and visions of America for the social benefit of America as a whole.

## An Overview of America’s World Role

In the chart below, America’s world role—as defined by Protestantism and as redefined by the minority faiths treated in this book—presents a convenient, albeit oversimplified, representation of the results of the investigation conducted over the course of this book. The reader will note points of convergence among the more progressive minority faiths, where America, ideally, would serve as a particular instrument of a universal purpose. Here, the very notion of Manifest Destiny (the right of America to *colonize, civilize, and Christianize* the continent of North America) is replaced by a concept of what might be thought of as a “common destiny”—an overarching, cosmopolitan worldview. This is perhaps best seen in a conspectus of the various visions of America’s world role as recapitulated in Table 13.1.

## Final Reflections: A World Civil Religion?

Is there some larger significance to the existence of these myths and visions of America? Without wishing to state the obvious, the religious myths and visions surveyed here deal with some of the perennial problematics in the American experience. They operate as social commentaries on the realities of American life, especially as measured against the ideals of American civil religion—which is where these myths intersect in the public sphere and in civil discourse. These religious myths and visions of America present a

full range of mythic and ideological possibilities. To the extent that myths are vehicles of social truths (and thus function as “true lies”<sup>87</sup>), the myths themselves may be compared. From this comparison, certain salient characteristics will fall into focus, which will be briefly touched on here.

Taking an inventory of the eleven religions covered in this book, two negative themes stand out: *racial prejudice and religious prejudice*. The obvious examples of these are the religions presented back-to-back in Chapters 7 and 8, that is, Christian Identity and the Nation of Islam. Christian Identity has always been considered radical, and it can never become mainstream. Its proposed homeland (the Northwest Imperative) is, in a sense, the logical outcome of Identity’s Two-Seed Myth, the Mud Races Myth, the Lost Tribes Myth, and the Racial Holy War Myth.

In somewhat the same way as Identity represents an extreme form of white nationalism, the Nation of Islam is a species of Black nationalism, as the Black Muslim Yacub Myth, Mother Wheel Myth, and the Destruction of America Myth bear out. However, their functional parallelism is a case of two lines diverging. Although they may have functionally intersected in the past, their current directions are increasingly divergent. This is because of the Nation of Islam’s relatively recent reconciliation with mainstream Islam. Black Muslims are still Black nationalists, but they have quietly put Elijah Muhammad’s racist myths (shared by Malcolm X in “Black Man’s History”) behind them. The dramatic change that took place when Malcolm X—after his pilgrimage to Mecca, where he personally witnessed a brotherhood of peoples of all races united by their common identity as Muslims—came to a realization that all whites were not “devils” as Elijah Muhammad had maintained. This is the Malcolm X that America has come to know and honor. The earlier Malcolm X would brook no tolerance in American mainstream society today.

The Protestants, collectively speaking, forged the “master myth” of America. Under its secularized corollary (albeit with much Christian support), the Manifest Destiny Myth, when translated into Congressional policy and duly executed, amounted to wholesale genocide of entire populations of the American Indian, and generally had a devastating impact on all things Indian. As racial prejudice sought religious sanction in the “Curse of Ham” Myth, it was effectively challenged by the African American Exodus Counter-Myth, which functioned to insulate African American Christians from the further impact of what may be described as essentially White forms of “Christianity,” and to produce an African American theology of liberation in its wake. The Latter-day Saints’ Mark of Cain Myth and, to a lesser extent, the Lost Tribes Myth are vestiges of racist beginnings that have effectively been renounced by the Latter-day Saints, but without overt repudiation. It would take something similar to the 1978 revelation received by LDS president Spencer Kimball to overturn some of the entrenched racial attitudes that overtly persist in Christian Identity and that covertly persist in the Nation of Islam, although it is expected that such vestiges of anti-White sentiment will subside within a more racially egalitarian America.



**Table 13.1** America's World Role as Defined by Protestantism and Minority Faiths

<i>MINORITY FAITH</i>	<i>AMERICA'S WORLD ROLE</i>
Native American Religion	To promote environmental ethics and ecological sustainability throughout "Turtle Island" and beyond. In the heritage of Deganawida, to advance global democracy in the interests of world peace
Protestantism	To promote originally Puritan values of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire. To promote global democracy. To promote "worldwide brotherhood," as expressed by Dr. Martin Luther King's vision of "the World House."
Christian Right	To promote Christian values consistent with America as a "Christian nation."
Catholicism	To promote "religious liberty as a basic civil right." To foster "the growth of international cooperation and solidarity in the service of that peace."
Judaism	To promote unity and pluralism "uniting all people in peace and freedom."
Mormon	To promote liberty and equal rights. To strengthen the foundation of society by fostering family values.
Christian Identity	To preserve the purity of the White race. To establish a Whites-only homeland
Nation of Islam	To realize America's potential to become the "Kingdom of God on earth"—"an egalitarian kingdom structured on truth, where each . . . will be treated with fairness and justice." However: "It is not a time for integration; it is a time for us to separate from our former slave-masters." (2008)
Contemporary Islam	Radical Islamism: No positive world role for America. (Progressive Islam: No definitive world role for America.)
Buddhism	To "bring those same fundamental rights and freedoms to people living under totalitarian regimes" and "to make this world straight." (Dalai Lama) To cultivate "a renaissance and enlightenment science [of] our times." (Robert Thurman) To promote a "Buddhist Democracy." (Dalai Lama, Thurman, Ikeda)
Baha'i Faith	To "lead all nations spiritually" in order to "unify the world."

Religious prejudice, the other pervasively negative theme, has run its course as well, although plenty of religious prejudice remains. Not only was Christian Identity motivated by racial hate, but by religious prejudice as well, particularly with respect to Jews. The irony is that Jewish source material—primarily, what Christians have traditionally referred to as the “Old Testament”—was taken up and reworked to serve the purposes of White nationalism. Adam became the progenitor and patriarch of Whites, while Satan had intercourse with Eve and spawned the reptilian non-White races. The same was true in Identity’s appropriation of the Jewish Lost Tribes Myth. While Mormons were not anti-Semitic, they also wrested the Lost Tribes Myth out of its originally Jewish context and made them American Indians, whose skin was originally white, but was later cursed with dark skin as a consequence of their unrighteousness. World unity—championed especially by the Dalai Lama’s reformulation of Tibetan Buddhism and by the Baha’i Faith—reconciles and resolves such racial and religious prejudices into a progressive and constructive agenda for the reconstruction of the world globally.

The alternative visions of America, presented by minority faiths, may be seen as responses to the challenges of pluralism and race, in which minority faiths—America’s alternative religions—implicitly seek to transcend the legacy of Puritanism in shaping American self-image. Wherever they embody egalitarian and progressive ideals, these minority faiths may be said to share important points of convergence. If visions of America’s role in promoting an egalitarian, justice-based world are translated into reality, then, in effect, they operate as projects of universal emancipation. Progressive visions of America’s world role, as held by some of the minority faiths presented in this book, have the potential and power to contribute to what White calls “consensus beliefs” and the American “consensus perception of world affairs.”

Whatever the merits and demerits of these myths and visions of America, they serve to stimulate reflection on social policy at a national level, and on purpose at an individual level. “What does it mean to be an American?” is a venerable, yet surprisingly fresh question. The question itself, not to mention its possible answers, invites renewed thinking on the purpose for which, under various religious views, people were created and for which America is now the world’s superpower. As presented in this book, these myths and visions of America serve as a mirror in which individual and national reflection may take place. True, the mirror may be distorted, but the mirror may also be refined such that it may one day reflect, not the world as it has been, but the world as it may become. America is something to be “religious” about, especially if one has the conviction that America—if it is to live up to its founding and quintessential values—is all about making the world a better place.

Recall that, in *Myths America Lives By*, author Richard Hughes had presented five foundational myths of America. Again, these are the following: (1) the Myth of the Chosen Nation; (2) the Myth of Nature’s Nation; (3) the Myth of the Christian Nation; (4) the Myth of the Millennial Nation;

and (5) the Myth of the Innocent Nation.<sup>88</sup> Perhaps—and this is tentative at best—the title should now, or in good time, be revised to reflect the past tense—*Myths America Lived By*. If this title is to be kept in its present tense, however, here is how these same myths might have been reshaped by America's minority faiths: (1) the Myth of the *Multilateral* Nation; (2) the Myth of the *Environmental* Nation; (3) the Myth of the *Multifaith* Nation; (4) the Myth of the *Ethical* Nation; and (5) the Myth of the *Cosmopolitan* Nation. This revisioning of the mission and destiny of America is actually the third of three basic types of American civil religion.

In Chapter 1, the reader will recall that Dean Hoge, sociologist at Catholic University of America, has outlined three types of civil visions of America, the first two of which clearly have American Protestant origins. The present writer will simply term these three visions of America as (1) Exemplarism; (2) Vindicationism; and (3) Cosmopolitanism.<sup>89</sup> In the first two instances, Henry Kissinger has characterized America's world role as both beacon and crusader.<sup>90</sup> These may be briefly recapitulated as follows.

(1) *Exemplarism*: The first vision of America is the Puritan vision, as first articulated by John Winthrop: "*Wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the Eies of all people are uppon us.*"<sup>91</sup> According to Hoge, the Puritan vision "focused on making America an example to the world, a model society to show all the world what a godly and free nation can be."<sup>92</sup>

(2) *Vindicationism*: From the vision of America as a model nation for other nations to follow led to a more proactive program of action, in which America's mission was to influence (or coerce) other nations to incorporate American principles of religion and good governance. This second vision, Hoge notes, "saw America as a chosen people with an obligation to work actively in the world to win others to American principles and to safeguard those principles everywhere."<sup>93</sup> Although weak at first, this vision was the direct precursor of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny: "It was clearly stated in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, that America's destiny was to settle the whole continent—and later, to bring freedom and civilization to all peoples."<sup>94</sup> This "activistic vision" of America "was a motivating source of the world Christian mission movement and of American expansionism in the late nineteenth century" in that "America would save the world for Christ or for democracy."<sup>95</sup>

The problem with Manifest Destiny is that the means justified the end, and great evils were perpetrated on Native Americans (i.e., the "First Nations," to invoke a Canadian term) not to mention pretextual territorial gains at the expense of other nations, of which the U.S.–Mexican War of 1846–1848 offers a prime instance in American history. This was America's first major conflict driven by the policy of "Manifest Destiny"—the doctrine that America, by dint of its divine destiny, had a God-given right to expand the nation's borders from sea to shining sea.<sup>96</sup> As a result of the U.S.–Mexican War, America acquired the northern half of Mexico—a vast territory that later became the states of California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah.

(3) *Cosmopolitanism*: “A third vision of America’s mission,” Hoge goes on to say, “calls for internationalism based not on messianic ideas but on a posture of openness and cooperation, assuming that others have legitimate interests and identities and equally valid perceptions of truth.”<sup>97</sup> Hoge connects this third ideal with Robert Bellah’s ideal of a “world civil religion.”<sup>98</sup> If America is to be reshaped as a multilateral, environmental, multifaith, ethical, and cosmopolitan nation, it may, in large part, be due to the collective influence of progressive minority faiths. This convergent influence may well be mediated through the instrumentality of commonly held “civil religion,” which may be described as a “vehicle of national religious self-understanding.”<sup>99</sup>

First described by Robert N. Bellah (professor emeritus of sociology and comparative studies at the University of California, Berkeley), American civil religion is itself in flux. In the conclusion of his seminal essay, “Civil Religion in America,” Bellah foresees the emergence of a “world civil religion” coefficient with “the emergence of a genuine transnational sovereignty.”<sup>100</sup> This world civil religion would necessarily incorporate “vital international symbolism into our civil religion” whereby “American civil religion” would become “simply one part of a new civil religion of the world.”<sup>101</sup> Obviously it would “draw on religious traditions beyond the sphere of biblical religion alone.”<sup>102</sup> In other words, while American civil religion has Protestant origins and is a decidedly American phenomenon, a world civil religion would be international in scope and interfaith in nature.

Bellah’s vision of a world civil religion has attracted genuine and widespread criticism. In his defense, Paul Nathanson, author of *Over the Rainbow: The Wizard of Oz as a Secular Myth of America*, notes that “Bellah believed that this process” of promoting a world civil religion “need not disrupt the continuity of American civil religion.”<sup>103</sup> This is because the notion of a world civil religion is “based not on worship of the nation itself, but on an understanding of American history in the light of an ultimate and universal reality.”<sup>104</sup> The emergence of a world civil religion would, in the American context, represent a shift from a *national* to a *global* perspective. These two perspectives need not be at odds with one another. A reconciliation is possible. This would necessarily entail an aligning of the two perspectives. “A world civil religion,” Bellah concludes in “Civil Religion in America,” is a world-embracing vision that “could be accepted as a fulfillment and not as a denial of American civil religion”—as “the eschatological hope of American civil religion from the beginning.”<sup>105</sup> Bellah wrote this statement in 1967. Forty years later, in 2007, Bellah revisited his notion of a world civil religion, reflecting on the role that world religions may play in promoting such a common vision:

But for the creation of a viable and coherent world order a world civil society is surely an essential precondition, and, dare I say it, any actual civil society will have a religious dimension, will need not only a legal and an ethical framework, but some notion that it conforms to the nature of

ultimate reality. The biggest immediate problem is the strengthening of global civil society. As I will elaborate in my next post, I would suggest that perhaps the *religious communities of the world may have something to contribute to that global civil society*, and, indeed, that *their participation may be essential for its success*.<sup>106</sup>

Is there a harmonic convergence of the visions of America as held by Protestantism and as redefined by America's minority faiths? If so, it would look something like this: In the Native American vision of America's world role, America should promote environmental ethics and ecological sustainability throughout "Turtle Island" and beyond. In the heritage of Deganawida, America should advance global democracy in the interests of world peace abroad and at home, beginning with healing and repairing the injustices of the past and mitigating their continuing social and economic effects upon America's indigenous peoples in the present.

In the Protestant vision of America, America should foster the originally Puritan values of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire, and promote democracy globally as well, through enlightened exemplarism, vindicationism, and cosmopolitanism. The quality of that democracy will be greatly enhanced when America uses her influence to realize and bring into reality a "worldwide brotherhood," as foreseen in Dr. Martin Luther King's vision of "the World House." While the subtitle of this book is "How Minority Faiths Transformed America's World Role," it should be noted that it took the prophetic voice of a vocal minority—primarily African American civil rights leaders—to influence (although not wholly transform) the Protestant vision of America's world role.

Briefly, America fulfills its Catholic mandate by promoting "religious liberty as a basic civil right," and fostering "the growth of international cooperation and solidarity in the service of that peace."<sup>107</sup> Judaism's vision of America is that it promote unity and pluralism "uniting all people in peace and freedom."<sup>108</sup> The Mormon vision of America, *inter alia*, is to promote liberty and equal rights, and to strengthen the foundation of society by fostering family values.<sup>109</sup> (Joseph Smith's 1844 political platform of "theodemocracy," however, appears to have no real place in Mormon doctrine.)

America should brook no tolerance for Christian Identity's goal of establishing a Whites-only homeland. While eschewing, if possible, the self-segregation that Louis Farrakhan continues to advocate as of December 2007—"It is not a time for integration; it is a time for us to separate from our former slave-masters"<sup>110</sup>—America can take cognizance of the Nation of Islam's vision that America may realize its potential to become the "Kingdom of God on earth"—"an egalitarian kingdom structured on truth, where each . . . will be treated with fairness and justice."<sup>111</sup> Since contemporary Radical Islamism has no positive world role for America, and since progressive Islam has no definitive world role for America either, the Islamic mandate for America has not reached anything closely resembling a true consensus.

Tibetan Buddhism's vision of America is to "bring those same fundamental rights and freedoms to people living under totalitarian regimes," "to make this world straight" (Dalai Lama), and to cultivate "a renaissance and enlightenment science in our times" (Robert Thurman), as well as to promote a "Buddhist Democracy" (Dalai Lama, Thurman, Ikeda).

America will fulfill the Baha'i Faith's vision of its great destiny when it arises to "lead all nations spiritually" in order to "unify the world." America will then be "prepared to play a preponderating role, as foretold by 'Abdu'l-Baha, in the hoisting of the standard of the Lesser Peace, in the unification of mankind, and in the establishment of a world federal government on this planet."<sup>112</sup> Only then will

that great republic . . . continue to evolve, undivided and undefeatable, until the sum total of its contributions to the birth, the rise and the fruition of that world civilization, the child of the Most Great Peace and hallmark of the Golden Age of the Dispensation of Baha'u'llah, will have been made, and its last task discharged.<sup>113</sup>

Civil religion can be the common ground of progressive religious values, which have the potential to exert a positive influence in the civic sphere. To the extent that civil religion incorporates the myth of America's spiritual destiny, that very myth will itself be subject to change and modifications, in accordance with the requirements of the times in which people live. "Part of the myth's resilience is due to the ability of Americans to adjust their religious sense of the nation's destiny to changed circumstances and altered expectations," Conrad Cherry observes. "It is reasonable to conclude that the same resilience will be evident in the future."<sup>114</sup> As social commentator John O'Sullivan puts it, America's "sense of itself" has always had to adjust to new historical circumstances and changed historical realities:

America's sense of itself always had a self-conscious, even ideological, side. First, the United States, founded by a rebellion against legitimate authority, had to explain and justify that rebellion to mankind. Then, the growing nation had to justify taking over a continent from its previous owners. Finally, it had to persuade the immigrants arriving on that continent that, in assimilating to the American nation, they were not being false to themselves, that Americanism was in some sense a universal creed to which all could be admitted.<sup>115</sup>

The changed circumstances of today may be summed up in one word: *globalization*. Globalization refers to "both the compression of the world and intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole" and as "both concrete global interdependence and consciousness of the global whole."<sup>116</sup> It is further defined as "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by

events occurring many miles away and vice versa.”<sup>117</sup> Ethical responses to globalization, which are essentially world order issues,<sup>118</sup> have given rise to a search for values of egalitarianism, equity, and sustainability—a worldview that some have called “globalism.” As a response to globalization, globalism may be viewed as a reflex or extension of Kantian cosmopolitanism and as the “moral universalism of international relations.”<sup>119</sup> Globalism, as a form of international ethics, may be considered to be the equivalent of a renewed cosmopolitanism that, today, views the world as an organic whole and advocates a global ethic commensurate with the needs of the twenty-first century.

Religions in America can and should translate their shared ideals into an American civil religion—and a corresponding ethic—that can help form a basis for the world civil religion that Robert Bellah envisions. To refine the point, religions ideally will remythologize and revision America in increasingly convergent and harmonic ways, offering an informal consensus on what may be called *proactive American cosmopolitanism*, where national interests are integrated with supranational interests, linking American foreign policy and the requirements of world order. If attuned to the needs of this day and age, these thought-orienting myths and action-incentive visions have every potential to serve as a spiritual mandate for America. Under the gaze of their ideals, universally minded religions can set the stage for the next quantum leap in the world’s social evolution—transitioning from war to peace, from nationalism to internationalism, from religious particularism to spiritual universalism, from racial animosity to racial amity, from gender repression to gender equality, and from resource exploitation to environmental renewal. Universal values actually devalue uniformity and promote diversity. Where there is a common ground of universal values, unity can therefore be the *effect* of diversity.

Myths and visions of America have attracted the theoretical interests of scholars for generations. The late Canadian Americanist Sacvan Bercovitch was among the foremost of these scholars. Bercovitch wrote of “transformations in the symbolic construction of America.”<sup>120</sup> What would happen if the three paradigmatic visions of America—exemplarism, vindicationism, and cosmopolitanism—were interwoven and transformed to meet the needs of the world of today and tomorrow? Telescoping these into the future, perhaps America can, one day, draw on the power of its moral authority (exemplarism)—if and when America resolves its race, class, and gender issues—to benignly and effectively exert its considerable political influence (vindicationism) for the promotion of global peace through world unity (cosmopolitanism).

For this ever to happen, the adoption of universal principles of good governance, of individual and group rights, of the equitable distribution of the world’s wealth and resources, of environmental sustainability, and of an emergent cosmopolitan order, will stand as a set of self-evident moral imperatives. In all this, America’s leadership in bringing about enlightened internationalism may be paradoxically characterized as a *unilateral multilateralism*—in which America *unilaterally* takes the initiative to foster the conditions whereby the

community of nations works in *multilateral* concert, in an orchestration of sovereign powers for the global good. Whether this entails endorsing arbitration treaties, lending more authority to the Hague courts, or encouraging qualified disarmament, national interest and world order can be guided by the ethical principles offered by universally oriented religious worldviews.

Consider the example of President Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919), 1906 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who, in 1902, took the initiative in opening the international Court of Arbitration at The Hague. Although founded in 1899, the Court of Arbitration had not been called upon by any power in its first three years of existence. When the United States and Mexico agreed to arbitrate, before the Hague Tribunal, their differences over the Pious Foundations of California, this example was followed by other powers, thus rendering the formerly inert arbitration machinery operational. Roosevelt played a prominent role in extending the use of arbitration to international problems in the Western Hemisphere as well.<sup>121</sup> Such leadership in international affairs was guided by religious principle. Writing that American leadership must exemplify the “ideals of democracy, of liberty under law, of social progress through peaceful industry, of education and commerce, and of uncorrupted Christianity,” Roosevelt was steered by the moral compass of Micah 6:8: “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”<sup>122</sup> As President Roosevelt prophetically said: “Upon the success of our experiment much depends, not only as regards our own welfare, but as regards the welfare of mankind.”<sup>123</sup> In fine, America’s political, economic, and scientific power can also serve as a reflex of *moral power*. Will America—taking Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson as moral exemplars of American cosmopolitanism—*unilaterally* take a leading role in initiating the *multilateral* process of bringing about the following event, as presaged by one of the minority faiths, the Baha’i Faith?

True civilization will unfurl its banner in the midmost heart of the world whenever a certain number of its distinguished and high-minded sovereigns—the shining exemplars of devotion and determination—shall, for the good and happiness of all mankind, arise, with firm resolve and clear vision, to establish the Cause of Universal Peace. They must make the Cause of Peace the object of general consultation, and seek by every means in their power to establish a Union of the nations of the world. They must conclude a binding treaty and establish a covenant, the provisions of which shall be sound, inviolable and definite. They must proclaim it to all the world and obtain for it the sanction of all the human race. This supreme and noble undertaking—the real source of the peace and well-being of all the world—should be regarded as sacred by all that dwell on earth. All the forces of humanity must be mobilized to ensure the stability and permanence of this Most Great Covenant. In this all-embracing Pact the limits and frontiers of each and every nation should be clearly



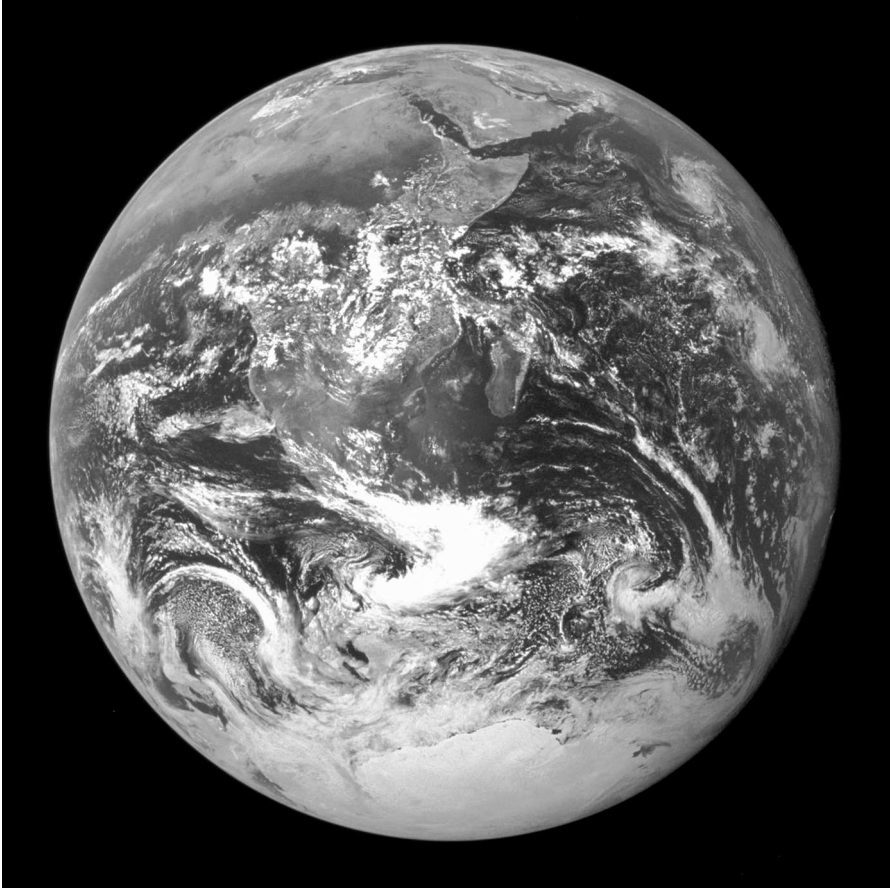
fixed, the principles underlying the relations of governments towards one another definitely laid down, and all international agreements and obligations ascertained.<sup>124</sup>

In this remarkable religious text, written by 'Abdu'l-Baha in 1875, the cause of universal peace—the product of a stable and enlightened world order—should be regarded as a “sacred” undertaking by peoples of all nations and faiths. In 1963—88 years later—Pope John XXIII opened his magisterial *Pacem in Terris* with these words: “Peace on Earth—which man throughout the ages has so longed for and sought after—can never be established, never guaranteed, except by the diligent observance of the divinely established order.”<sup>125</sup> In other words, world order—that is, the state of ideal international relations described by 'Abdu'l-Baha as “true civilization” and Pope John XXIII as “peace on earth”—is essentially a sacred task best served when based on the principles of justice and reciprocity advocated by the religions of the world, whether in America or abroad. Indeed, according to the Universal House of Justice (internationally elected Baha'i governing council) in a message addressed “To the Peoples of the World” in 1985, “World peace is not only possible but inevitable.”<sup>126</sup> In this document, the role of religion is made clear: “No serious attempt to set human affairs aright, to achieve world peace, can ignore religion.”<sup>127</sup> America, in protecting *freedom* of religion while proscribing the *establishment* of religion, would do well to heed the enlightened cosmopolitanism of the minority faiths that promote it.

As a grand synthesis of the ideals held by America's progressive Protestant and minority faiths, American civil religion can play a preponderating role in inspiring a world civil religion that, in turn, universalizes these egalitarian values for all nations. As Pope John Paul II said to President Ronald Reagan in 1987, America has a great responsibility in the world today:

The more powerful a nation is, the greater becomes its international responsibility, the greater also must be its commitment to the betterment of the lot of those whose very humanity is constantly being threatened by want and need. . . . America needs freedom to be herself and to fulfill her mission in the world.<sup>128</sup>

If America arises to accomplish this mission, then America will fulfill its world role and realize its prophetic destiny—whether imagined or real. America will have lived up to the grand destiny envisioned by the more optimistic religions surveyed in these pages. Then will the noblest myths of America have become reality and their grandest visions realized—in the new American cosmopolitanism of world unity which, in the immortal words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., will “transform this world-wide neighborhood into a world-wide brotherhood”<sup>129</sup> and by which, according to one Baha'i text, “the oneness of the whole body of nations will be made the ruling principle of international life.”<sup>130</sup>



*Figure 13.1.* NASA's celebrated "Blue Marble" photo of Earth seen from space, taken on December 7, 1972, at 5:39 a.m. by American astronauts aboard the Apollo 17 spacecraft, en route to the Moon, at a distance of about 18,000 miles above Earth. It shows Antarctica, Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula. This famous photograph has often been used to promote world peace.

(Public domain. Courtesy of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).)

## Chapter 13 Update: America and the World—Toward “A More Perfect Union”

*Thus in the beginning all the World was America, and more so than that is now.*

— John Locke (1690)<sup>131</sup>

*The nature of America is such that many people define themselves—or a part of themselves—in relation to it, for or against. This is part of the reality in which our leaders must operate.*

— Former President, Bill Clinton (2007)<sup>132</sup>

Critics have, and always will, take exception to American exceptionalism.

Is America special? Is this country unique? Is the United States of America favored in the eyes of God? Does America have a destiny beyond the opportunistic and rapacious doctrine of Manifest Destiny? Can America make good on what it has done badly? Can this country learn from its past mistakes? Is that possible when this powerful nation continues to take actions that don't always live up to their worthwhile objectives?

Religious pluralism is a social fact. Does this diversity add to “value polytheism,” to use Weber's phrase? Or can religious values, across the spectrum, somehow give rise to a consensus of core values? Does America's national motto, *E pluribus unum* (“from many, one”), apply to religions across the social landscape? Put another way, can “civil religion” mediate between faith-communities and the public sphere?

One thing we know for sure: America will always champion democracy. Religions are not democracies, obviously. Yet religious visions of America (at least the positive ones) tend to accept and appreciate this great nation as a democracy. From the standpoint of American exceptionalism, America's most favored nation status, in the grand scheme of things, is typically seen as a reflex of America's regard for human rights and as a model of good governance, but only to the degree that America can continue to live up to its ideals, against which its domestic and international affairs will always be measured. America not only has its own benchmarks, it is also judged in the court of international opinion. America's world role is not to rule, but to influence for the greater good. To what extent do the religions surveyed in this book have anything to say about America as a democracy, and how does this tie into America's world role at the present time, and into the foreseeable future?

According to Daniele Archibugi, author of *The Global Commonwealth of Citizens: Toward Cosmopolitan Democracy*, “democracy can and must become the method of global governance.”<sup>133</sup> Yet “democracy” is a broad term. It means different things, depending on a given historical or national context. Democracy may be narrowly construed, as in ancient Athens, where

democracy originated as a local phenomenon, and engaged primarily free males as vocal and voting citizens. Broadly conceived, democracy is not only a multi-national phenomenon, it is transnational, as well—if international relations can aspire to a democracy of nations. A global self-governing regime, which respects national sovereignties so long as the rights of other nation-states are not infringed, has yet to be perfected.

Yet religions are distinct from politics, even though they do get mixed up with one another. This book, subtitled *God & Apple Pie*, has surveyed theologies and ideologies of America. Sometimes this involves politics, including ideas ranging from good governance to foreign policy. This may be thought of as the “politicizing of religions” or even the “sacralizing of politics.” In so doing, no attempt is being made at promoting a specific political agenda. That is not the purpose of this book. In speaking of America’s “world role,” of interest with general principles, not political principals, whether domestic or foreign.

Generally, religions do not presume to tell governments how to do their job, although there may be some principles of good governance that may be brought to bear from the standpoint of religious ethics. Democracy may be well and good, but it is not good enough. A system of governance, no matter how well designed, is only as good as the people who govern; as well as the people governed. For example, in America, to discriminate on the basis of race, religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, disability, etc., violates various federal and state public policies, codified as laws. Despite the existence of “long arm statutes” that govern personal jurisdiction outside the boundaries of a given state, the law can only reach so far. The law cannot change people’s hearts. Banning discrimination as a matter of law is a legal remedy for infringing on the rights of others on the pretext of who they are. In this sense, laws against discrimination are corrective. They are not prescriptive. Good governance is measured by the yardstick of that which is “good” (as well as expedient, efficient, cost-effective, etc.) not only as it relates to the commonweal or “common good,” but also as it pertains to the individual citizen. This is where religion comes into play in terms of its influence on the world at large.

The Golden Rule exists, in its positive and negative forms, in just about every world religion. Although a universal ethic, the Golden Rule is primarily individual in nature. Is it possible to conceive of the Golden Rule as a collective ethic? In other words, why can’t the Golden Rule apply to nations as well as individuals? In terms of political realism, that’s far easier said than done. In fact, some may argue that practicing reciprocity as a matter of foreign policy may, in some cases, not be best for the national interest. Then how best to align national interests with global interests? It would seem that the two are increasingly interconnected, inextricably so, one from the other.

As in Michael Jackson’s song, “We Are the World,” America is a microcosm of the world. That much is generally accepted as social fact. To what

extent do Americans see themselves as part of the greater world? Perhaps its time to redefine American exceptionalism in precisely these terms. The global context is the new frame of reference. We are now all indigenous with respect to the Earth. No exceptions. Instead of being an exception to the general rule (to analogize blackletter law), what America does as a nation, from now into the future, it should strive to do exceptionally well. Resource-rich and politically and economically powerful, America can, and should, live up to its role as a world citizen *par excellence* in the community of nations. This is where nationalism—whether American nationalism, Black nationalism (Nation of Islam), or White nationalism (Christian Identity)—simply gets in the way.

So how can religions serve as a moral and ethical resource for America? One way is to explore, through interfaith dialogue, how faiths can be friends, how faith-communities can be partners for the common good, and how America can best fulfill the noblest visions that have been described, in detail, in the pages of this book. Myth-telling, after all, is not myth-making. Yet the national myth is still in the making. The story of America is a continuing saga. It's future is yet to be written. The religious myths and visions retold in *God & Apple Pie* are worth retelling. They are “non-fiction” in the sense that they really do, or did, exist. Yes, some of these myths have a surreal, fantastic character—as good as any fiction. Yet if religious myths are meant to convey moral and social truths, then some are worth remembering, and others are not. Some myths are no longer believed, only to remain as relics of the past, like “ghost light” of dead galaxies, majestic star-cities that no longer exist. These myths are put on display in the virtual museum exhibits of the foregoing chapters. Time to go on. Time to rewrite. Time to do our best to deserve the benediction, “God bless America!”

Things to come (eschatology) must come from the things themselves (phenomenology). In English: the future arises out of the present, as the product of the past. If universally true, then this is true for America as well. Americans, one and all, will do well to reflect on what it means to be an American. American identity is bound up with the “idea of America” and a sense of national purpose. The best that the religions surveyed in this book can offer is a panoply of options as to the world role America can best pursue. This begins with each and every American citizen identifying, not only as an American citizen but as a “world citizen” as well. A transition is then needed from an “America first” mentality to an “Earth first” policy of enlightened national self-interest.

Whether America's distinctive nationalism will become America's distinctive internationalism, time will tell. In a quest for transcendent identity—individual and collective—America's purpose may “to form a more perfect Union”<sup>134</sup> of nations, “with liberty and justice for all”—a pledge of allegiance to the world, as well as to America itself. “God and country,” in this sense, expands to “God and countries.” With poetic license, we can “update” John Locke's 1690 statement, cited as the epigraph to this section

of the Conclusion, for a rhetorical purpose: “Thus, in the end, America is all the World, and more so than that is now.”<sup>135</sup> Enlightened nationalism becomes cosmopolitanism, where exceptionalism embraces egalitarianism. There are those who say: “America should care about the world. No exceptions.”

Which of the foregoing religious myths and visions of America best serve as a moral compass, pointing in that direction (or in any other), is up to the reader to judge. These American dreams and ambitions are in flux. They change with the times, or fall by the wayside. If it’s time for change, the religious myths and visions of America will likely follow. It’s all a part of the grand American experiment to make this world a better place.

Perhaps it’s fitting to close with an ecumenical prayer for America—one that ties in with Robert Bellah’s idea of a “civil religion.” On September 11, 2002—a year after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on America—a public ceremony was held at the Pentagon to commemorate those who lost their lives the year before. The ceremony was broadcast on C-Span that day. Historian, James Moore, Jr., commented that, on this solemn occasion, “the hues of American religious diversity were cast in a special way”<sup>136</sup> by a prayer composed and read by Diane Sherwood, Ph.D., former Associate Director of the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, DC (IFC) for five years until she passed away in 2003. Moore comments that this “was a prayer that few who heard it have forgotten.”<sup>137</sup> Moore adds: “At a time when the United States stands alone, unparalleled in its economic, political, and military strength, the nation implicitly recognizes that it is accountable for its actions to a higher power.”<sup>138</sup> Whether or not the rest of the world is watching, proverbially it could be said that “God is watching” America.

The prayer reads:

Holy One, Great Mystery,  
 Known by a thousand names,  
 We come today as a grieving family,  
 A grieving nation, a grieving world,  
 We open ourselves for deep healing,  
 Courage and wisdom.  
 We are Sikhs and Muslims, Christians and Jews,  
 Mormons, Baha’is, Hindus, Buddhists,  
 And those on a hundred paths to Truth,  
 We ask for Compassionate Hearts,  
 Sorrowing, but rejoicing always,  
 Dying but behold we live,  
 With a unified and humble voice we pray . . .  
 God Bless America!<sup>139</sup>

Americanism is not an ultimate value. At best, Americanism can have utilitarian value as a social ethic if its ideals are attuned to global concerns.

In that sense, “apple pie” as a metaphor for Americanism presupposes not only the making and baking of the pie, but the partaking of it as well. Who is invited to the table? Who gets a proverbial “piece of the pie?”

Astronomer Carl Sagan famously said: “If you want to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first create the universe.”<sup>140</sup> In the American social universe, the values that religions typically associate with a higher power should be part of the mix. America’s social matrix is now a microcosm of the world. It’s not altogether nationally narcissistic to say that the world is watching America. (So, in this sense, John Winthrop was right, after all.) World opinion of the “City upon a Hill” today is mixed, but the global gaze is transfixed. As “American as God and apple pie” is the idea and ideals of “America” that evolve over time. Each “apple pie”—as a product or artifact of American culture—should be better than the last. May the best visions of America, portrayed above, work their transformational social magic. Providentially, that’s why “God and apple pie” go together in making America a better place. Adding “God” as the most nutritive component, “apple pie” is a metaphor to relish in celebrating and strengthening America’s adventure in freedom and social impact on a world scale.

## Notes

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(Public domain. Library of Congress. See [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbpebib:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(rbpe+0320250d\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbpebib:@field(NUMBER+@band(rbpe+0320250d)))). Accessed January 12, 2015.

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# About the Author

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CHRISTOPHER BUCK publishes broadly as an independent scholar in a wide range of fields, including American studies, Native American studies, African American studies, religious studies, Islamic studies, and Baha'i studies.

Author of books *God & Apple Pie* (2015), which is the revised edition of *Religious Myths and Visions of America* (2009), along with *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy* (2005), *Paradise & Paradigm* (1999), *Symbol & Secret* (1995/2004), and *Religious Celebrations* (edited by J. Gordon Melton, with Buck as co-author, 2011), Dr. Buck has contributed book chapters to *'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey West* (2013), *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an* (2006/2015), *The Islamic World* (2008), *American Writers* (2004/2010/2015), and *British Writers* (2014), and has published various academic journal articles and encyclopedia articles as well.

A former university professor, Dr. Buck previously taught at Pennsylvania State University (2011), Michigan State University (2000–2004), Quincy University (1999–2000), Millikin University (1997–1999), and Carleton University (1994–1996). He currently practices law as an attorney in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he lives with his wife, Nahzy Abadi Buck, and his sons, Takur Buck, and Taraz Buck, Ph.D.



Cat sniffs apple pie during cover photo shoot. (Photo by David Smith.)

## Praise for *God & Apple Pie*

*“Religious Myths and Visions of America* is an intellectual feast, sparkling with original interpretations of how many religions have helped shape America’s national character, from the Iroquois origin story, to Christian, Mormon, and Black Muslim, and Baha’i beliefs, among others. This book will provoke insights and controversy for years to come.”

**Bruce E. Johansen**  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

“Christopher Buck’s new book is a timely and highly readable consideration of the way American religions have continued to remythologize the country. Few topics are more relevant today, in a time when the self-definition of Americans is such an influential force on the global stage.”

**William E. Paden**  
University of Vermont

“An experiment on the ‘idea of America’ with engaging results, this book examines the role of ten religions in redefining America’s world role—a topic of importance given America’s influence in world affairs. On the premise that America is both ‘nation and notion,’ this project is a breath of methodological fresh air. *Religious Myths and Visions of America* is a novel, imaginative and rigorously scholarly contribution to comparative religion, worthy of serious attention and debate.”

**Todd Lawson**  
University of Toronto

“In this remarkable book, Dr. Buck examines the key religious ideas that have shaped America’s idea of itself. This country has always had a visionary aspect, a sense of the numinous. I can think of no subject in American studies more central to our national psyche. This is an important, interesting, thought-provoking work.”

**Jay Parini**  
Middlebury College

*“Religious Myths and Visions of America* has many strengths. The author has defended his thesis with solid research. He has also made an original contribution to American studies.”

**Richard Kyle**  
Journal of American History

“Using myths and visions of minority faiths, Buck has introduced an engaging and fresh new approach to understanding and appreciating the influence of these faiths on America’s role in the world. Scholars have always known about the impact of race and ethnicity on religion throughout American history, but Buck’s contribution is in the way that he explains the historical connections between race and religion and in the process of shaping America’s role in the world. Above all, Buck keeps the reader engaged and intrigued in a study that reads like a good novel by a warm fire on a cold winter evening.”

**Richard W. Thomas**  
Michigan State University



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