
Americanism—and Its Enemies

David Gelernter

ANTI-AMERICANISM has blossomed frantically in recent years. Nearly the whole world seems to be pock-marked with lesions of hate. Some of this hatred focuses on George W. Bush, but much of it goes beyond the President to encompass the supposed evils of America and Americanism in general. In its passionate and unreasoning intensity, anti-Americanism resembles a religion—or a caricature of a religion. And this fact tells us something important about Americanism itself.

By Americanism I do not mean American tastes or style, or American culture—that convenient target of America-haters everywhere. Nor do I mean mere patriotic devotion; many nations command patriotic devotion from their citizens (or used to). By Americanism I mean the set of beliefs that are thought to constitute America's essence and to set it apart; the beliefs that make Americans positive that their nation is superior to all others—*morally* superior, closer to God.

Frenchmen used to think France superior on account of its culture and *civilisation*; many still do. Germans once thought they were smarter, deeper

and (possibly) racially superior. Englishmen once considered themselves natural rulers and believed that their governmental structures set Britain on a higher plane. And so on. Not all nations have “isms,” and not all those who do (or did) have been equally serious about their particular “ism.” America has one and is dead serious about it.

Most national “isms” have seemed fearsome or hateful only insofar as they were militarily threatening. Communism was feared because of its power to foment internal subversion. In the late-18th and 19th centuries, America stood for radical republicanism and the breaking-down of inherited rank—grounds for hatred among much of the European elite. But over the last century or so, America has *remained* an object of hatred within nations that have themselves gone over to American-style democracy; has been hated by people who had nothing whatsoever to fear from American power. America, Winston Churchill said during World War II, was the great republic “whose power arouses no fear and whose pre-eminence excites no jealousy.” Evidently this is no longer true.

Americanism is notable, of course, not merely for its spectacular ability to arouse hate. Over the roughly four centuries of American and proto-American existence, it has also inspired remarkable feats of devotion. You would need *some* sort of fierce determination to set forth in a puny, broad-beamed, high-pooed, painfully slow, nearly undefended 17th-century ship to cross the uncharted

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ocean to an unknown, unmapped new world. You would need remarkable determination to push westward into the heartland away from settlement and safety. You would need ferocious bravado to provoke the dominant great power of the day on the basis of rather flimsy excuses, and ultimately to declare war and proclaim your independence. The Union side in the Civil War would have needed practically incandescent determination to keep fighting after the South had won decisive battles, slaughtered vast numbers of Union soldiers, and gained the sympathy of the two leading West European powers.

In the 20th century, you would have needed enormous determination to turn your back on the isolationism and anti-militarism that comes naturally to Americans and butt into World War I—and then, after World War II, to reject isolationism once again when you accepted the Soviet empire's challenge. Freedom and independence for Greece and Turkey—not exactly pressing American interests—occasioned America's entry into the cold war. And what on earth would make an Idaho or Nebraska farmer—that man about whom Tony Blair spoke so feelingly in his eloquent 2003 address to Congress—believe that it was his responsibility to protect the Iraqi people and the world from Saddam Hussein? What did all that have to do with *him*?

Americanism is potent stuff. It is every bit as fervent and passionate a religion as the anti-Americanism it challenges and rebukes.

II

THAT AMERICANISM *is* a religion is widely agreed. G.K. Chesterton called America “the nation with the soul of a church.” But Americanism is not (contrary to the views of many people who use these terms loosely) a “secular” or a “civil” religion. No mere secular ideology, no mere philosophical belief, could possibly have inspired the intensities of hatred and devotion that Americanism has. Americanism is in fact a Judeo-Christian religion; a millenarian religion; a biblical religion. Unlike England's “official” religion, embodied in the Anglican church, America's has been incorporated into all the Judeo-Christian religions in the nation.

Does that make it impossible to believe in a secular Americanism? Can you be an agnostic or atheist or Buddhist or Muslim and a believing American too? In each case the answer is yes. But to accomplish that feat is harder than most people realize. The Bible is not merely the fertile soil that brought Americanism

forth. It is the energy source that makes it live and thrive; that makes believing Americans willing to prescribe freedom, equality, and democracy even for a place like Afghanistan, once regarded as perhaps *the* remotest region on the face of the globe. If you undertake to remove Americanism from its native biblical soil, you had better connect it to some other energy source potent enough to keep its principles alive and blooming.

But is it not true that the Declaration of Independence—one of America's holiest writings—treats religion in a cool, Enlightenment sort of way? It does. But we ought to keep in mind an observation by the historian Ralph Barton Perry. The Declaration, Perry reminds us, was an *ex post facto* justification of American beliefs. It was addressed to educated elite opinion, especially abroad; it was designed to win arguments, not to capture the essence of Americanism as Americans themselves understood it. That essence emerges in the less guarded pronouncements of the Founding Fathers and many other leading exponents and prophets of Americanism, from Winthrop and Bradford through John Adams and Jefferson through Lincoln and Wilson, Truman, Reagan.

Few believing Americans can show, nowadays, how Americanism's principles are derived from the Bible. But many are willing to say that these principles *are* God-given. Freedom comes from God, George W. Bush has said more than once; and if you pressed him, I suspect you would discover that not only does he say it, he believes it. Many Americans all over the country agree with him. The idea of a “secular” Americanism based on the Declaration of Independence is an optical illusion.

III

SUPPOSE YOU were to put together a bookful of pronouncements and predictions about America's destiny, ranging over four centuries. What title would you give it?

Such an anthology did appear in 1971; it was edited by an associate professor of religious studies and subtitled “Religious Interpretations of American Destiny.” The book's main title was *God's New Israel*. From the 17th century through John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Americans kept talking about their country as if it were the biblical Israel and they were the chosen people.

Where did that view of America come from? It came from Puritanism—Puritanism being not a separate type of Christianity but a certain approach to Protestantism. And here is a strange fact about

Puritanism. It originated in 16th-century England; it became one of the most powerful forces in religious if not all human history. It consistently elicited bitter hatred—and was directly responsible for (at least) two world-changing developments. It provoked the British Civil War (in which the Puritans and Parliament asserted their rights against the crown and the established church), and the first settlements by British religious dissenters in the new world.

And then it simply disappeared. In the late 1700's or early 1800's, Puritanism dropped out of history. Traces survived in Britain and (even more so) in America, in the form of churches once associated with it. But after the 18th century, we barely hear about Puritanism as a live force; before long everyone agrees that it is dead.

What happened to it? In a narrow sense, Puritan congregations sometimes liberalized and became Unitarian; the Transcendentalists, prominent in American literature from roughly 1820 through 1860, are often described as the spiritual successors of the Puritans. But Puritanism was too potent, too vibrant simply to vanish. Where did all that powerful religious passion go?

Puritanism had two main elements: the Calvinist belief in predestination with associated religious doctrines, and what we might call a "political" doctrine. The "political" goal of Puritanism was to reach back to the pure Christianity of the New Testament—and then even farther back. Puritans spoke of themselves as God's new chosen people, living in God's new promised land—in short, as God's new Israel.

I believe that Puritanism did *not* drop out of history. It transformed itself into Americanism. This new religion was the end-stage of Puritanism: Puritanism *realized* among God's self-proclaimed "new" chosen people—or, in Abraham Lincoln's remarkable phrase, God's "almost chosen people."

Many thinkers have noted that Americanism is inspired by or close to or intertwined with Puritanism. One of the most impressive scholars to say so recently is Samuel Huntington, in his formidable book on American identity, *Who Are We?* But my thesis is that Puritanism did not merely inspire or influence Americanism; it turned into Americanism. Puritanism and Americanism are not just parallel or related developments; they are two stages of a single phenomenon.

This is an unprovable proposition. But as a way of looking at things, it buys us something valuable. Consider: Puritanism was shared by people of many faiths, at any rate within Protestant Christianity. You could find Puritans in Congregational-

ist and Presbyterian churches, and in Baptist and Quaker churches; some Puritans never left the Episcopalian or Anglican church, and eventually you could find Puritans in Methodist churches, too. Later, as I have noted, you could even find them in Unitarian churches—despite Unitarianism's dramatic disagreements with other forms of Protestantism.

Americanism has these same peculiar properties, and takes them a step further. It, too, is a religion professed by people of many different faiths. Because of its "political" or biblical aspect, specifically its "Old Testament" focus, it was destined ultimately to be at home not merely in many kinds of Protestant churches but in *every* congregation that venerated the Hebrew Bible—in American Protestant churches, American Catholic churches, and American synagogues. This may seem like a strange set of attributes for a Judeo-Christian religion—yet Puritanism itself had the same attributes.

IV

IF AMERICANISM is the end-stage of political Puritanism, which in turn was the yearning to live in contact with God as a citizen of God's new Israel, what is its creed?

The idea of an "American creed" has been around for a long time. Huntington lists its elements as "liberty, equality, democracy, individualism, human rights, the rule of law, and private property." I prefer a different formulation: a conceptual triangle in which one fundamental fact creates two premises that create three conclusions.

The fundamental fact: the Bible is God's word. Two premises: first, every member of the American community has his own individual dignity, insofar as he deals individually with God; second, the community has a divine mission to all mankind. Three conclusions: every human being everywhere is entitled to freedom, equality, and democracy.

In the American creed, both premises and all three conclusions refer back to the Bible, especially the Hebrew Bible. Americans have defined the "community" of the premises more and more broadly over the years, until it has grown to encompass the whole population of adult citizens—thus bringing the premises gradually into line with the universal conclusions. Today there is pressure to define the community more broadly still, so that it includes (for example) illegal as well as legal residents.

Freedom, equality, democracy: the Declaration held these truths to be self-evident, but "self-evi-

dent" they were certainly *not*. Otherwise, America would hardly have been the first nation in history to be built on this foundation. Deriving all three from the Bible, theologians of Americanism understood these doctrines not as philosophical ideas but as the word of God. Hence the fervor and passion with which Americans believe their creed. Americans, virtually alone in the world, insist that freedom, equality, and democracy are right not only for France and Spain but for Afghanistan and Iraq.

V

HOW ARE the creed's three conclusions derived from the Bible? Freedom is the message of the Exodus, one of the Hebrew Bible's great underlying themes. Bible readers believed that the Exodus story predicted the fate of nations. The literary scholar David Jeffrey names three major works that "illustrate the power of the Exodus story in the formation of American national identity": Samuel Mather's *Figures and Types of the Old Testament* (1673), Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* (a history of 17th-century New England, 1702), and Jeremiah Romayne's *The American Israel* (1795).

In 1777 Nicholas Street preached in East Haven, Connecticut:

The British tyrant is only acting over the same wicked and cruel part, that Pharaoh king of Egypt acted toward the children of Israel some 3,000 years ago.

The same day the Declaration of Independence was adopted, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson were appointed as a committee to propose a seal for the brand-new United States. Given what we know about Americanism, it is hardly surprising that they suggested an image of Israel crossing the Red Sea and Moses lit by the pillar of fire, with the motto: "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God." (The seal was never adopted, but a copy of the recommendation survives in the papers of the Continental Congress.)

Next, equality. Equality was connected with Genesis—every man is created in God's image—and also with the powerful anti-monarchy message delivered by the prophet Samuel. Abraham Lincoln took the largest and most important step in American history toward putting this part of the creed into effect, and also gave the clearest exposition of its biblical roots. Citing the words of the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln said:

This was [the Founding Fathers'] lofty, and wise, and noble understanding of the justice of the Creator to His creatures. Yes, gentlemen, to *all* His creatures, to the whole great family of man. In their enlightened belief, nothing stamped with the Divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on, and degraded, and imbruted by its fellows. They grasped not only the whole race of man then living, but they reached forward and seized upon the farthest posterity.

A near-relative of Lincoln's argument appears in one of the first documents of colonial American history, Alexander Whitaker's *Good Newes From Virginia* of 1613. Whitaker urges that the Indians be well treated; after all, "One God created us, they have reasonable soules and intellectuall faculties as well as wee; we all have Adam for our common parent: yea, by nature the condition of us both is all one."

There is also a remarkable similarity between Lincoln's thought and a rabbinic midrash according to which a phrase in Genesis—"these are the archives of Adam's descendants"—is the single greatest statement in the Torah. Why? Because it teaches that all men, being descended from the same ancestors, are equal in dignity.

OF THE creed's three elements, democracy might seem the least likely to be traced back to biblical sources—but Americans of past ages knew the Bible much better than we do. The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, often called the "first written constitution of modern democracy," were inspired not by democratic Athens or republican Rome or Enlightenment philosophy but by a Puritan preacher's interpretation of a verse in the Hebrew Bible. They were drafted in May 1638, in response to a sermon by Thomas Hooker before the general assembly in Hartford.

Hooker cited the biblical passage, "Take ye wise men, and understanding, and known among your tribes, and I will make them rulers over you" (Deuteronomy 1:13). This he interpreted to mean "that the choice of public magistrate belongs unto the people, by God's own allowance. . . . The foundation of authority is laid, firstly, in the free consent of the people."

Hooker's interpretation was hardly novel or eccentric. Many preachers knew and believed the same thing. In 1780, roughly a century and a half after Hooker's epoch-making sermon, with the Revolutionary War under way, Pastor Simeon

Howard of Boston was pondering the new nation's government. He too decided—on the basis of this same passage, and of the classical Jewish historian Josephus—that America should be a democratic republic.

Howard's advice was as radical as it was straightforward, as avant-garde as it was Puritan, Bible-centered, and godly. "In compliance with the advice of Jethro," he preached,

Moses chose able men, and made them rulers [over the Israelites in the desert]; but it is generally supposed that they were chosen *by the people* [emphasis added]. This is asserted by Josephus, and plainly intimated by Moses in his recapitulatory discourse, recorded in the first chapter of Deuteronomy.

Historians have pointed out that the clergy wielded far more influence over the colonial public than a Tom Paine or John Locke did. In 1776, three-quarters of American citizens were Puritan. Puritans have long been classified as strait-laced, dour, and joyless, far from passionate revolutionaries or radical democrats. Like nearly all stereotypes, these are partly true—but they are a long way from the whole truth.

A recent Pew Research Center survey found that not even a third of American journalists have "a great deal of confidence" that the American electorate makes correct choices at the polls. The Puritans thought otherwise, and so did Abraham Lincoln. The historian William Wolf cites Lincoln's belief "that God's will is ultimately to be known *through* the people." Lincoln said: "I must trust in that Supreme Being who has never forsaken this favored land, through the instrumentality of this great and intelligent people." What chance is there that American journalists or professors or school-teachers would describe Americans today as "this great and intelligent people"?

VI

WE CAN go further. To sum up Americanism's creed as freedom, equality, and democracy for all is to state only half the case. The other half deals with a promised land, a chosen people, and a universal, divinely ordained mission. This part of Americanism is the American version of biblical Zionism: in short, American Zionism.

The relation between Americanism and American Zionism is something like the relation between Anglicanism and Anglo-Catholicism. Anglo-Catholicism *is* Anglicanism, but the name was invented to

underline the closeness between Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism. The term "American Zionism" similarly underlines the closeness between Americanism and the biblical idea of a divinely chosen people and promised land.

When I say that Americanism equals American Zionism, I am in one sense merely adding up statements by eminent authorities. John Winthrop in 1630: "Wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us." Thomas Jefferson in his Second Inaugural address: "I shall need . . . the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life." (The last phrase is an update of the Bible's "flowing with milk and honey.") Abraham Lincoln declared his wish to be a "humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty and of this, His almost chosen people."

Hundreds of other statements along the same lines might be gathered from the whole formative period of Americanism, from the early 1600's through the Civil War. Among the most striking is one of the earliest, from the famous journal of William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*. Once the Pilgrims had landed in the new world, Bradford writes, "What could now sustain them but the Spirit of God and His grace?" And he continues:

May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say: "Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in the wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and He heard their voice and looked on their adversity," etc.

Bradford is paraphrasing verses from Deuteronomy (26:5 ff.) that read (in the Geneva Bible of 1560, which Puritans preferred to the King James version): "A Syrian was my father, who being ready to perish for hunger, went downe into Egypte. . . . When we cried unto the Lord God of our fathers, the Lord heard our voyce, & looked on our adversitie."

The Bible reports that the Israelites were instructed to speak these verses when they brought the year's first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem, there to recall publicly the Lord's gift of the promised land. Bradford was equating the arrival of Englishmen in Plymouth with the arrival of the wandering Israelites in the promised land. The same verses play a central role in the Haggadah recited by Jews on Passover to this day—although Bradford could not have known that. Showing an uncanny tendency to *think* like a Jew, he singled them out on his own, and put them at the center of

his own version of (what we might call) a Pilgrim seder.*

Evidently the historian Samuel Eliot Morison did not realize the Passover significance of these verses, either. His scrupulous edition of Bradford's journal is the scholarly standard, with plenty of footnotes—but none at this point. In other places where Bradford quotes or paraphrases the Hebrew Bible without giving a citation, it is not quite clear whether or not Morison has picked up the reference. Yet you cannot really understand the Pilgrims, or Puritans in general, unless you know the Hebrew Bible and classical Jewish history; knowing Judaism itself also helps. But people with this sort of basic knowledge have rarely bothered to study the Puritans, and those who study the Puritans have rarely bothered to know what the Puritans knew.

Early exponents of Americanism tended to define even their own *Christianity* in ways that make it sound like Judaism. Thus John Winthrop: “the onely way to avoyde this shipwracke [of angering the lord] and to provide for our posterity is to followe the Counsell of Micah, to doe Justly, to love mercy, to walke humbly with our God.” Lincoln, a profoundly religious man, refused all his life to join a church. But he did make the celebrated assertion that he *would* join a church whose entire creed was “what our lord said were the two great commandments, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and mind and soul and strength, and my neighbor as myself.” He was referring to the Gospel passage in which Jesus cites these two verses from the Hebrew Bible as the essence of Christianity.

I do not claim that Lincoln, Winthrop, and Bradford were crypto-Jews. They were not. The point is that classical Israel's (and classical Zionism's) contribution to Americanism is incalculable. No modern historian or thinker I am aware of—not Huntington or Morison or Perry or Mead or Perry Miller or even Martin Marty or Sydney Ahlstrom—has done justice to this extraordinary fact. They seem to have forgotten what the eminent 19th-century Irish historian William Lecky recognized: that “Hebraic mortar cemented the foundations of American democracy.” And even Lecky, I suspect, did not grasp the full extent of this truth. Unless we do grasp it, we can never fully understand Americanism—or anti-Americanism.

VII

THERE HAVE been at least four crucial turning points—“climacterics,” Churchill would have called them—at which Americans spoke explicitly

and simultaneously about the religious content and the world mission of Americanism. The first was when the colonies declared their independence. Here is Dr. Banfield, in 1783:

’Twas [God] who raised a Joshua to lead the tribes of Israel in the field of battle; raised and formed a Washington to lead on the troops of his chosen States. ’Twas He who in Barak’s day spread the spirit of war in every breast to shake off the Canaanitish yoke, and inspired thy inhabitants, O America!

In 1799, with the Great Republic safely established, Abiel Abbot delivered a Thanksgiving sermon:

It has been often remarked that the people of the United States come nearer to a parallel with Ancient Israel, than any other nation upon the globe. Hence OUR AMERICAN ISRAEL is a term frequently used; and our common consent allows it apt and proper.

Washington’s early biographer Jared Sparks quotes him to the effect that “there never was a people who had more reason to acknowledge a divine interposition in their affairs than those of the United States.”

The second climacteric was the Civil War. Lincoln’s understanding of that conflict, writes Edmund Wilson, “grew out of the religious tradition of the New England theology of Puritanism.” In 1862, Lincoln made “a solemn vow before God” to free the South’s slaves. William Wolf notes that this vow was “more in conformance with Old Testament than with New Testament religion,” was “imbedded in Lincoln’s biblical piety,” and “came to him as part of the religious heritage of the nation.” The “climactic expression of his biblical faith,” according to Wolf, was the Second Inaugural address:

It reads like a supplement to the Bible. In it there are fourteen references to God, four direct quotations from Genesis, Psalms, and Matthew, and other allusions to scriptural teaching.

“We can appreciate even in these few words,” writes Sidney Ahlstrom of the Second Inaugural, “the astounding profundity of this self-educated child of the frontier, this son of a Hard-shell Baptist who never lost hold of the proposition that na-

* One day, it seems to me, there will be a Thanksgiving Haggadah for Americans to recite at the national holiday Lincoln proclaimed. I have in mind an actual document telling the story of Puritan sufferings in England; of America’s birth; of the bloody Civil War struggle to realize the creed’s promises; of repeated re-enactments of the Exodus that make up America’s history—interspersed with passages from the English Bible. This is a project I’m at work on myself.

tions and men are instruments of the Almighty." If Americanism is a religion, this is its holiest document after the Bible and the Declaration; and Lincoln is its greatest prophet.

WORLD WAR I marked the third turning point: America stepped forward to assume its role as a world power. It happened under President Woodrow Wilson, the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers.

Many people found Wilson hard to take. At the end of his career, on his return from negotiations in Paris at the close of the war, he went down in flames—shot out of the sky like the Red Baron by a Senate and nation unwilling to join the League of Nations, which Wilson had more or less invented, or ratify the Treaty of Versailles, which he championed.

Yet Wilson stands right at the center of classical Americanism. No President spoke the language of Bible and divine mission more lucidly. His First Inaugural address was composed in pure and perfect American, Lincoln-inspired:

The nation has been deeply stirred by a solemn passion, stirred by the knowledge of wrong, of ideals lost, of government too often debauched and made an instrument of evil. The feelings with which we face this new age of right and opportunity sweep across our heartstrings like some air out of God's own presence, where justice and mercy are reconciled and the judge and the brother are one.

During Wilson's administration, Americanism accomplished a fundamental transition. It had always included the idea of divine mission. But what *was* the mission? Until the closing of the frontier in the last decade of the 19th century, the mission was to populate the continent. With the frontier closed, the mission became "Americanism for the whole world." Of this transition, the historian William Leuchtenberg writes:

The United States believed that American moral idealism could be extended outward, that American Christian democratic ideals could and should be universally applied. . . . The culmination of a long political tradition of emphasis on sacrifice and decisive moral combat, the [world] war was embraced as that final struggle where the righteous would do battle for the Lord.

In his speech asking for a declaration of war, Wilson told Congress that "The world must be made safe for democracy"—a much-ridiculed phrase, and

one that captures perfectly America's sense of obligation to spread its own way of life and its own good fortune. In another speech, this one explaining American war aims and intended for German consumption, Wilson concluded with these words about America: "God helping her, she can do no other." The historian Mark Sullivan comments:

Probably not one in a hundred of his American hearers recognized that paraphrase of Martin Luther's declaration, immortal to every German Lutheran, "*Ich kann nicht anders*" (I can do no other).

And so we circle back to the beginnings of Protestantism, which begot Puritanism, which begot Americanism.

The final climacteric was the cold war—its start and its finish. Franklin D. Roosevelt had taken the United States into World War II, but stubbornly refused to accept Churchill's diagnosis of Stalin as a ruthless imperialist. His successor, Harry Truman, followed FDR's path—at first. But in 1946 Truman changed course dramatically. When Britain was no longer able to prop up the non-Communist governments of Greece and Turkey, Truman decided that the U.S. must take over that soon-to-lapse commitment. He announced the Truman Doctrine. From then on, the Soviets would no longer be allowed unlimited scope for their imperialist ambitions; the United States had decided to get into the game.

Truman's announcement was in the spirit of classical Americanism. It recognized America's message and duty to all mankind:

I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressure. . . . The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms.

Although historians often skip over this point, Truman's world-view centered on the Bible nearly to the extent Lincoln's had. By his own account, he had read through the Bible three times by age fourteen; he read it through seven times more during the years of his presidency. It shaped his understanding of the American enterprise. Truman makes this remarkable comment in his *Memoirs*: "What came about in Philadelphia in 1776 really had its beginning in Hebrew times."

The end of the cold war was presided over by Ronald Reagan, who returns us (once again) to the nation's beginning. In one of his best-remembered phrases, Reagan declared that America was and

must always be the “shining city upon a hill.” John Winthrop had conceived this idea aboard the *Arabella* bound for Massachusetts Bay in 1630. The phrase goes back to Matthew (“Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid”), and indirectly to the prophet Isaiah (“In the end of days it shall come to pass that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and many nations shall flow unto it”). Reagan’s use of these words connected modern America to the humane Christian vision—the Puritan vision—the vision (ultimately) of the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish people—that created this nation.

VIII

SOME AGREED with Ronald Reagan and some disagreed. Some approved of him and some disapproved. Yet, to a remarkable extent, those who *bated* him are the ones who hate America—for many of the same religion-mocking reasons that made them ridicule Woodrow Wilson.

The great British economist John Maynard Keynes had this to say regarding Wilson’s behavior at the Paris Peace Conference: “Now it was that what I have called his theological or Presbyterian temperament became dangerous.” Wilson’s idealistic peace plan—the “Fourteen Points”—became, according to Keynes, “a document for gloss and interpretation and for all the intellectual apparatus of self-deception, by which, I daresay, the President’s forefathers had persuaded themselves that the course they thought it necessary to take was consistent with every syllable of the Pentateuch.”

The British diplomat Harold Nicholson concurred. He described Wilson as “the descendant of Covenanters, the inheritor of a more immediate Presbyterian tradition. That spiritual arrogance which seems inseparable from the harder forms of religion had eaten deep into his soul.”

The same type of accusation would be directed at Ronald Reagan. On the occasion of his “evil empire” speech, for example, the columnist Mary McGrory called Reagan’s denunciation of the Soviet Union “a marvelous parody of a revivalist minister.” Another journalist, Colman McCarthy, wrote that Reagan had descended “to the level of Ayatollah Khomeini”—to the level, that is, of an enemy of mankind who uses religion to do evil.

That Americanism is the successor of Puritanism is crucial to anti-Americanism. In the 18th century, anti-Americans were conservative, monarchist anti-Puritans. (Boswell reports Samuel Johnson’s

announcement that “I am willing to love all mankind, *except an American.*”) In the 19th century, European elites became increasingly hostile to Christianity—which inevitably entailed hostility to America. In modern times, anti-Americanism is closely associated with anti-Christianism *and* anti-Semitism.*

Anti-Americans are still fascinated and enraged by Americans’ bizarre tendency to believe in God. In the months before the Iraq war in spring 2003, a Norwegian demonstrator waved a placard reading, “Will Bush Go to Hell?” An expatriate American wrote recently (for the *FrontPage* website) of being instructed by Londoners that “the United States is one giant fundamentalist Christian nation peopled by raging Bible-thumpers on every street”; that America is “running wild with religious extremism that threatens the world far more than bin Laden.”

And we needn’t go to Norway or Britain to find angry denunciations of President Bush and the Americans who support him in religion-mocking terms. The President’s faith, said one prominent American politician in September 2004, is “the American version of the same fundamentalist impulse that we see in Saudi Arabia, in Kashmir, and in many religions around the world.”

The speaker was former Vice President Al Gore. His comments were offensive and false. Today’s radical Islam is a religion of death, a religion that rejoices in slaughter. The radical Christianity known as Puritanism insisted on choosing life. Americanism does, too.

Puritans took to heart these famous words from the Hebrew Bible: “I have set before you this day life and death, blessing and curse: therefore choose life and live, you and your children” (Deuteronomy 30:19). On board the *Arabella*, John Winthrop closed his famous meditation of 1630 by citing that verse from Deuteronomy, centering his words on the page for emphasis:

Therefore let us choose life
that wee, and our Seede,
may live; by obeying his
voice, and cleaving to him,
for hee is our life, and
our prosperity.

No Saudi fanatic, no Kashmiri fanatic could have written those words. John Winthrop was a founder of this nation; we are his heirs; and we ought to thank God that we have inherited his humanitarian decency along with his radical, God-fearing Americanism.

* It has been many centuries since Christians in the West have been routine objects of organized hatred; they do not even have a word for it. But they had better find one.

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