

THE ALMOST-CHOSEN PEOPLE

America's first English settlers were religious dissidents driven to the New World by religious intolerance. As today's debates over prayer in the public schools and government support for parochial education suggest, the new Americans did not leave the conflict over church-state relations behind them. At first, the colonists tried to create their own theocratic communities. But the sectarian violence of the Old World convinced most Americans of the evils of an established church. At the same time, they never doubted that a core of religious belief was essential to a healthy democracy. Here, historian Paul Johnson describes how, despite occasional crises, the United States struck a unique balance, incorporating religious faith into its political life without wedding the state to religious institutions.

by Paul Johnson

When Abraham Lincoln called Americans "the almost-chosen people," he used an apt phrase, as valid now as when he coined it 120 years ago. It perfectly expresses the close but at the same time slightly uneasy relationship between the American Republic and the religious spirit.

That Americans are exceptional in their attitude toward religion is obvious to all, and never more so than today. But visitors from old Europe, such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Pope John Paul II, are struck by the way in which high church attendance rates and an often blatant religiosity coexist with the passionate pursuit of materialism. They are inclined to agree with Cotton Mather, who made the point as long ago as 1702 while documenting what he termed "Christ's great deeds in America." It seemed, he concluded, that "*Religion* brought forth prosper-



Pilgrims Going to Church, by George Henry Boughton (1833–1905). As it happened, profit-seeking investors financed the New World settlements of the Pilgrims and other English religious dissidents.

ity, and the *daughter* destroyed the *mother*. . . . There is danger lest the *enchancements* of this world make them forget *their errand into the wilderness*.”

The first settlers on the Atlantic Seaboard were undoubtedly animated by a sense of divine mission. The work most widely read by them, after the Bible, was John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* (1563), which vigorously broadcast the dynamic myth that the English constituted the Elect Nation. During the 16th and 17th centuries, most English people believed that their country had received Christianity directly from Christ’s disciple Joseph of Arimathea; that the Emperor Constantine was British (his mother Helena having been daughter of the British King Coilus); and that he had Christianized the whole civilized world, as Foxe put it, “by the help of the British army.”

The myth was held most tenaciously among the Protestant sectarians, especially those who went to the New World. The explorer and navigator John Davis said: “There is no doubt but that we of England are this saved people, by the eternal and infallible presence of the Lord predestined to be sent into these Gentiles in the sea, to those Isles, and famous kingdoms, there to preach the peace of the Lord.” In a sermon to the Virginia Com-

pany in 1622, the poet John Donne, dean of St. Paul's, told the subscribers: "God taught us to make ships, not to transport ourselves, but to transport Him. You shall have made this island, which is but the suburbs of the old world, a bridge, a gallery to the new; to join all to that world that shall never grow old, the kingdom of heaven." The first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, crossing the Atlantic aboard the *Arbella* in the spring of 1630, wrote: "We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us."



It was inevitable that such devout nation-builders should place their government in a religious frame. So in a sense did all Christian societies. But in the Old World, state authority drew its divine sanction from traditional sacral kingship; in America, it took the form of conscious dedication by democratic assemblies expressed in formal documents. Those sailing on the *Mayflower* in 1620, "for the Glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith," stated their desire "solemnly and mutually in the presence of God" to "covenant and combine ourselves together in a civil body politic."

No one who studies the key constitutional documents in American history can doubt the central and organic part played by religion in the origins and development of American republican government. The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut (1639), the first written constitution in the modern sense of the term, puts forth in its introduction that the state owes its origin to "the wise disposition of the divine providence" and that "the word of God" requires "an orderly and decent Government established according to God" to "maintain and preserve the liberty and purity of the Gospel."

Where specific provision was not laid down, magistrates were to administer justice "according to the rule of the word of God," and both governor and magistrates swore to act "according to the rule of God's word." It did not seem possible to these founders to distinguish between government, on the one hand,

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and religion (by which they generally meant Protestant Christianity) on the other. As William Penn put it in his *Preface to the Frame of Government of Pennsylvania* (1682): "Government seems to me a part of religion itself, a thing sacred in its institution and end . . . an emanation of the same divine power that is both author and object of pure religion."

Such quasi-religious societies could easily have become theocracies on the Christian medieval model, tolerating no dissent from established creeds and exercising the right to persecute on Saint Augustine's principle: "Compel them to come in." They did not do so for two reasons. First, even the churches were often run democratically, by the congregation, not by the clergy. So they stressed morals and behavior rather than theology and doctrine. Second, they moved away from the Augustinian tradition of close and detailed definition of dogma and toward the alternative proposed by the early 16th-century humanist Erasmus, that religion should define as little as possible and concentrate on propagating the spirit of Christian fellowship.



Because Protestant religious establishments were popular, not hierarchical, a distinctive American religious tradition began to emerge. There was never any sense of division in law between laymen and cleric, between those with spiritual or social privileges and those without. America was born Protestant and did not have to become so through revolt and struggle against a Catholic Church or an ecclesiastical establishment. In all these respects it differed profoundly from the Old World. America's common national creed was to grow out of a set of Protestant assumptions.

In any case, in a frontier society it was impossible to preserve sectarian discipline and uniformity: Dissenters, such as the Disciples of Christ, or later the Mormons, simply moved on. Breaking away from strict New England Calvinism, Roger Williams founded Providence, Rhode Island, calling it "a shelter for persons distressed for conscience." His patent (1644) declared that "the form of government established in Providence Plantations is DEMOCRATICAL, that is to say a government held by the free and voluntary consent of all, or the greater part, of the free inhabitants." This was the first commonwealth in modern history to make religious freedom, as opposed to an element of toleration, the principle of its existence and a reason for separating church and state. As its royal charter (1663) stated: "No person within the said colony, at any time hereafter, shall be in any wise

molested, punished, disquieted or called in question, for any differences in opinion in matters of religion, and who do not actually disturb the civil peace of our said colony; but that all . . . may from time to time, and at all times hereafter, freely and fully have and enjoy his and their own judgments and consciences, in matters of religious concernments."

It is important to grasp that as American society embraced the principles of voluntarism and tolerance in faith, it did so in a spirit not of secularism but of piety.



Almost unconsciously the consensus grew that voluntary adherence to one faith, and tolerance of all others, was the foundation of true religion. In this respect English and American society separated as early as the 1650s. While England was debating whether to have an official Presbyterian or a Congregationalist religion, and then in practice getting an Anglican one, the former Governor of Massachusetts Sir Henry Vane expounded on the principles of civil and religious liberty in *A Healing Question* (1656). He argued that they were inseparable and that freedom of religious belief was essential to the maintenance of a Christian society: "By virtue then of this supreme law, sealed and confirmed in the blood of Christ unto all men . . . all magistrates are to fear and forbear intermeddling with giving rule or imposing in those matters." This document and the sentiments that it articulated were more instrumental in determining the spirit of the U.S. Constitution in religious matters than were the writings of the Enlightenment.

The coming American Revolution was in essence the political and military expression of a religious movement, the Great Awakening (ca. 1720–50). Certainly those who inspired it and carried it through believed that they were doing God's will. The man who first preached the Revolution, Jonathan Edwards (1703–58), believed strongly that there was no real difference between a political and a religious emotion, both of which were God-directed. The right kind of politics, for him, was no more than realized eschatology. The disciplined community of souls could work toward a better world even now. Edwards, a Connecticut preacher, saw no reason that God should not "establish a constitution" whereby human creatures would cooperate with Him; so men should know that the hour was coming when God "shall take the kingdom"; and he looked for "the dawn of that glorious day."

Edwards saw religion as the essential unifying force in

American society, and the force was personified by his evangelical successor, George Whitefield (1714–70), an Anglican turned Methodist. Until the 1730s, America had been a collection of very different societies, engaging in little contact with one other and often possessing stronger links to Europe than to their neighbors. Religious evangelism was the first continental phenomenon, transcending differences between the colonies and dissolving state boundaries. And Whitefield was the first American public celebrity, as well known in New Hampshire as in Georgia. His form of religious ecumenicalism preceded and shaped political unity. It popularized the real ethic of the American Revolution, which was not so much political as social and religious—the beliefs and standards and attitudes that the great majority of the American people had in common. It was a Christian, to a great extent a Protestant, ethic infinitely more important than the purely dogmatic variations of the sects.

Pennsylvania, the key state in the formation of the union, was a microcosm of this ethos. Most diverse in religion, it was a Presbyterian stronghold, the headquarters of the Baptists, a state where Anglicanism was strong and Catholicism flourished. It also was home to a variety of Mennonites, Moravians, and German pietists, as well as Quakers and other sects. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were thus framed in an appropriate setting. The institution of religious freedom and of a government that did not distinguish among faiths was the work not so much of millenarian sects revolting against magisterial churchmen as of the denominational leaders and statesmen themselves, who saw that pluralism was the only form consonant with the ideals and necessities of their new country.

Even those most strongly influenced by the secular spirit of the Enlightenment acknowledged the centrality of the religious spirit in giving birth to America. As John Adams put it in 1818: “The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. [It] was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations.” He saw religion, indeed, as the foundation of the American civic spirit:

One great advantage of the Christian religion is that it brings the great principle of the law of nature and nations, love your neighbour as yourself, and do to others as you would that others do to you, to the knowledge, belief and veneration of the whole people. . . . The duties and rights of the man and the citizen are thus taught from early infancy.

The United States of America was not therefore a secular state. It might more accurately be described as a moral and ethical society without a state religion. Clearly, those who created it saw it as an entity, to use Lincoln's later phrase, "under God." The Declaration of Independence in its first paragraph invokes "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" as the entitlement of the American people to choose separation from Britain. It insists that men have the right to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" because they are so "endowed by their Creator." The men who wrote it appeal, in their conclusion, to "the Supreme Judge of the world" and express their confidence in "the Protection of Divine Providence."

Equally, the men called to govern the new state saw a political society within a religious framework. George Washington began his first inaugural address (1789) with a prayer to "that Almighty Being, who rules over the universe, who presides in the councils of nations," asking Him to bless a government consecrated "to the liberties and happiness of the people." He was certain that his prayer expressed the sentiments of Congress as well as his own, for "no people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency."



When relinquishing office in 1796, Washington again expressed the wish that "Heaven may continue to you the choicest tokens of its beneficence." In a memorable passage, he pointed out that "religion and morality are indispensable supports" of "political prosperity" and that the "mere politician" ought to "respect and cherish them." Nor, he added, was a purely secular morality enough in itself: "Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." Virtue and morality were "the necessary spring of popular government," and no supporter of it could "look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundations of the fabric." In Washington's eyes at least, America was in no sense a secular state.

What is still more remarkable is that, during the 19th century, the cold, secularizing wind that in Europe progressively denuded government of its religious foliage left America virtually untouched. The Civil War, like the Revolution, was the political and military expression of a religious event, the product of the

Second Great Awakening (ca. 1795–1835), just as the Revolution had been the product of the first. Lincoln, like Washington, saw the Deity as the final arbiter of public policy, but in addition he articulated what I would call an element most characteristic of American political philosophy—the belief that the providential plan and the workings of democracy are organically linked. As he made clear at his first inauguration (1861), the dispute between North and South, and its resolution, would illustrate the way in which the democratic process was divinely inspired:

Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people? . . . If the Almighty Ruler of Nations, with his eternal truth and justice, be on your side of the North, or yours of the South, that truth and that justice will surely prevail by the judgment of this great tribunal of the American people.

When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, he appealed both to world opinion and God for approval. Lincoln confided to his Cabinet that the timing was determined by divine intervention in the Battle of Antietam. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles noted in his diary:

He remarked that he had made a vow—a covenant—that if God gave us the victory in the approaching battle, he would consider it an indication of the Divine will, and that it was his duty to move forward in the cause of the slaves. He was satisfied it was right—and confirmed and strengthened in his action by the vow and its results.

No one ever reflected more deeply on the relationship between religion and politics than Lincoln, the archetypal American statesman. To clarify his own thought, he wrote:

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present Civil War it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party; . . . By his mere great power on the minds of the now contestants, he could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And, having begun, he could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.

It is impossible to imagine Lincoln's European contemporaries, Napoleon III, Bismarck, Marx, or Disraeli, thinking in these terms. Lincoln did so in the certainty that most of his fellow Americans could and did think along similar lines.

Just as religion was a determining factor in the two decisive events of American history, the Revolution and the Civil War, it has continued to hold a special place in the American political process, at the popular level and at the highest levels. In 1898, at the time of the Spanish-American War and the annexation of the Philippines, President William McKinley said he was "not ashamed" to admit to a gathering of his fellow Methodists:

I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night. And one night late it came to me this way. . . . There was nothing left for us to do but to take them all and to educate the Philippines and uplift and civilise and Christianise them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow men for whom Christ also died.

McKinley's ignorance of centuries of Catholic worship in the Philippines seems shocking now. But in any case, no European imperialist, whether a Joseph Chamberlain or a King Leopold, would have dared to justify himself in such a manner. He would have been accused of humbug. McKinley was patently sincere; many Americans thought the same.

No wonder, then, that President Woodrow Wilson, the first American head of state to operate on the European scene, seemed so strange a figure to European politicians. Observing him at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the economist John Maynard Keynes did not see a politician at all: "The president was like a Nonconformist minister, perhaps a Presbyterian." He "thundered commandments from the White House." And when he came to Europe, "He could have preached a sermon on any of them or have addressed a stately prayer to the Almighty for their fulfillment, but he could not frame their concrete application to the actual state of Europe."

Keynes's reaction was typical of Europeans. Even today a European asked to single out the most pervasive trait of American public men in this century might point to the quasi-religious character of their rhetoric. This applies whether they are puritan like Calvin Coolidge, or Catholic like John F. Kennedy; men of strong faith like Herbert Hoover and Ronald Reagan, or less devout, like Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon B. Johnson.

For the truth is, the political culture of the United States is

strongly religious, and the reason that it is religious, unlike that of Europe, is that the political process and the religious establishment have never been perceived to be in conflict.

The harmony of religion and liberty in the United States was the first thing that struck Alexis de Tocqueville. "In France," he wrote in *Democracy in America* (1835), "I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom pursuing courses diametrically opposed to each other; but in America I found that they were intimately united, and that they reigned in common over the same country." He thought religion was "the foremost of the political institutions" of America, since republican democracy, with its minimal use of authority and the power of government, could not survive without religious sanctions, voluntarily accepted.

The point was reiterated 120 years later by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, probably as typical of American mid-20th-century attitudes as Lincoln was of those prevailing in the mid-19th century. In 1954, Eisenhower told the *Christian Century* magazine: "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith." He added, still more characteristically, "And I don't care what it is."

Eisenhower's indifference to doctrinal distinctions reflected faithfully the Erasmian nature of religious America. It was and is concerned with moral conduct rather than dogma; American religious groups were judged not by their theology but by the behavior of their adherents. Thus the very diversity of the sects constituted the national religious strength, since all operated within a broad common code of morals.



The merits of American religious pluralism explain why, for example, the growth of the state education system was not, as in Europe, a source of conflict. It was nonsectarian without being nonreligious. Its moving spirit, Horace Mann (1769–1859), thought religious instruction should be taken "to the extremest verge to which it can be carried without invading those rights of conscience which are established by the laws of God, and guaranteed by the constitution of the state." In the early stages, the public schools taught a kind of generalized Protestantism as a form of "character building." Later, as the make-up of American society broadened to include millions of Catholics and Jews, the specifically religious element was further diluted until it disappeared altogether and was succeeded by what might be called the spirituality of the Republic, itself based upon the Protestant

ethical and moral consensus.

Jews and Catholics were able to accept the public school system, and the broader national ethic it reflected, because the concept of libertarian plurality in religion coincided with their interests. During the 1850s, the Irish, nearly all of them Catholics, constituted 35.2 percent of all immigrants. Up to 1930, over 3.5 million of them came to America to escape Protestant government and Protestant landlords. In 1884, for the first time in history, a leading Catholic prelate was able to endorse a state that did not accord a special status to his church: "There is no conflict between the Catholic Church and America," said Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, Minnesota, ". . . and when I assert, as I now solemnly do, that the principles of the church are in thorough harmony with the interests of the Republic, I know in the depths of my soul that I speak the truth."



For immigrant Jews, the motive of religious freedom was still stronger. From 1881 to 1914, over two million of them came to the United States, equaling 10 percent of all immigrants in the early years of the 20th century. The overwhelming majority of them came from Russia, Rumania, and Galicia, and their primary motive was to escape systematic discrimination and active persecution on religious grounds. What attracted them to America, above all, was not its secularity, but its religiosity. America was not just neutral regarding religions; it was benevolently neutral. For Catholics and Jews alike, America had a unique appeal: Their religious practices were not merely tolerated—they were respected. Had America's open door policy been maintained in the 1930s and '40s, there is little doubt that most of the victims of the Holocaust would have found refuge here. Now, as in the days of the *Mayflower*, the United States is the first and obvious choice of anyone, anywhere in the world, dislocated in the cause of religious freedom. America's continuing role as the primary refuge of the persecuted underlines its religious exceptionalism.

But if religion is a unifying force in American culture, underpinning republicanism and democracy, it can also be a divisive one. It is often both at the same time. The first Great Awakening inspired the Revolution and so created America. But the Revolution also divided colonial society: One-quarter of the nation remained neutral; one-quarter was loyalist—thousands of them migrated to Canada. The Second Great Awakening helped to launch the Civil War and to prompt the abolition of slavery; but

in the process it tested the Union almost to destruction and left wounds that did not heal for a century. The third "great awakening" (ca. 1875–1914) produced that unsuccessful experiment in social engineering, Prohibition, which set town against country, Catholic against Protestant, native against immigrant, and Middle West against the rest.

We are now seeing the effects of a fourth "great awakening" that also is proving divisive in many ways.

A relative decline in affiliation with mainline churches among Americans (from 69 percent in 1960 to 49.7 percent in 1980) has concealed a steady and cumulatively formidable growth in religious conservatism, most marked in the Protestant churches but by no means confined to them.

As the mainline churches began to decline, they sought the mutual protection of ecumenicalism—through the National and World Council of Churches and common political platforms of ever more liberal hue. These events, in turn, provoked an angry, conservative response from their disenfranchised rank and file. This protest took the form of a new *de facto* unity that stretches across the sects and even into Catholicism. This popular ecumenicalism is based on a common reassertion of traditional moral values and of belief in the salient articles of Christianity not as symbols but as plain historical facts. It appeals to many nonpracticing Christians, and even non-Christians, who feel that the Judeo-Christian system of ethics and morals that underlies American republican democracy is in peril and in need of reestablishment. The phenomenon has no counterpart in Europe.

Like its predecessors, this ferment is having political consequences, the first being the phenomenon of Reaganism and popular revulsion from the liberal consensus of the 1960s and '70s. And in communities across the country, fervent debates are taking place on issues such as texts and prayer in schools, crime, feminism, and abortion. These differences remind us that religion and politics are organically linked in America, movements in one echoing and reinforcing movements in the other.

Just as the strength of religion in America sustains and nurtures democracy, so the vigorous spirit of American democracy continually reinforces popular religion. As long as America remains the world's most powerful and enthusiastic champion of democracy, it is likely to preserve its exceptional role as the citadel of voluntary religion.
