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Divining America Religion in American History

The Religious Origins of Manifest Destiny

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In 1845, an unsigned article in a popular American journal, a long standing Jacksonian publication, the *Democratic Review*, issued an unmistakable call for American expansionism. Focusing mainly on bringing the Republic of Texas into the union, it declared that expansion represented “the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.” Thus a powerful American slogan was born. “Manifest Destiny” became first and foremost a call and justification for an American form of imperialism, and neatly summarized the goals of the Mexican War. It claimed that America had a destiny, manifest, i.e., self-evident, from God to occupy the North American continent south of Canada (it also claimed the right to the Oregon territory including the Canadian portion). “Manifest Destiny” was also clearly a racial doctrine of white supremacy that granted no native American or nonwhite claims to any permanent possession of the lands on the North American continent and justified white American expropriation of Indian lands. (“Manifest Destiny” was also a key slogan deployed in the United States’ imperial ventures in the 1890s and early years of the twentieth century that led to U.S. possession or control of Hawaii and the Philippine Islands.)

But Manifest Destiny was not simply a cloak for American imperialism and a justification for America’s territorial ambitions. It also was firmly anchored in a long standing and deep sense of a special and unique American Destiny, the belief that in the words of historian Conrad Cherry, “America is a nation called to a special destiny by God.” The notion that there was some providential purpose to the European discovery and eventual conquest of the land masses “discovered” by Christopher Columbus was present from the beginning. Both the Spanish and the French monarchs authorized and financed exploration of the “New World” because, among other things, they considered it their divinely appointed mission to spread Christianity to the New World by converting the natives to Christianity. Coming later to the venture, the British and especially the New England Puritans carried with them a demanding sense of Providential purpose.

John Winthrop, Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, gave the clearest and most far-reaching statement of the idea that God had charged the English settlers in New England with a special and unique Providential mission. “On Boarde the Arrabella, on the Atlantick Ocean, Anno 1630,” Winthrop delivered the blueprint for what Perry Miller has dubbed an “errand into the wilderness” which set the framework for most of the later versions of the idea that “America had been providentially chosen for a special destiny.” Winthrop delivered his lay sermon just before he and his fellow passengers disembarked on the shore of Boston harbor, the place, Winthrop proposed, to which God had called them to build up a model Bible commonwealth for Protestants in England and elsewhere to emulate. “Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into Covenant with him for this work, we have taken out a commission,” he declared, adding “if the Lord shall please to hear us and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath he ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission and will expect a strict performance of the Articles contained in it.” He went on to specify more full what fidelity to this commission entailed: the people of New England must “follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. 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 others necessities.” But it is near the close of the speech that he coined the phrase that has been invoked again and again (most recently by President Ronald Reagan) to express the idea of America’s providential uniqueness and destiny. If we are faithful to our mission, “we shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when tens 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 like New England, for we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people upon us.”

In the decades following Winthrop’s speech most New England divines preached less about New England’s divine mission, than issue deep, laments—Jeremiads, subsequent historians have called them—about how far New Englanders had fallen from fulfilling the requirements of their Covenant with God and how all the woes and turmoil that had befallen them—Prince Phillip’s war, the loss of New England’s charter, the witchcraft phenomenon, droughts and dreadful winters, etc.—were the signs and result of God’s wrath over their failings. However, in the midst of what subsequently came to be referred to as “the Great Awakening” (but at the time was considered an extra-ordinary outpouring of God’s saving grace) that spread across New England and the other British colonies in the 1740s, the idea that God had chosen America for a special destiny was resurrected in a new form. In the midst of the Awakening, the great New England theologian and revivalist, Jonathan Edwards wrote that “the latter day glory” in short, the Millennium, the “end times” that would bring the second coming of Christ to earth and spread of the King of God across the world, would begin in America. “It is not likely that this work of God’s spirit [the revivals] so extraordinary and wonderful,” Edwards asserted, “is the dawning, or at least a prelude of that glorious work of God, so often foretold in scripture, which in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind.”

Leading preachers of the **Second Great Awakening** that swept across the United States over much of the first half of the nineteenth century, such as Lyman Beecher (father of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry Ward Beecher) and Charles Grandison Finney, reasserted the claim that America would be the site of the millennium and that the Awakening was its sure sign. They, however, gave their idea of the millennium a particular American twist. Just as Winthrop tied the idea of New England’s providential mission to the character of the Christian commonwealth they were charged to establish, so too did millennialists like Beecher describe the society that would bring forth the millennium as the American republic, thus conjoining the coming of the millennium with the spread and triumph of American liberty and democracy. In his 1832 tract, *The Plea for the West*, Beecher stated that at first he had thought Edwards’ prediction “chimerical,” but now thought that “all providential developments since, and all the existing signs of the times, lend corroboration to it. But if it is by the march of revolution and civil liberty, that the way of the Lord is to be prepared, where shall the central energy be found, and from what nation shall the renovating power go forth?” Beecher’s answer was clear: this nation is, in the providence of God, “destined to lead the way in the moral and political emancipation of the world.” The relation between God and nation, in this millennialist formulation, is both subtle and somewhat ambiguous. The fusion between God’s will and the nation’s democratic character gives divine sanction to the United States’ secular arrangements of liberty and democracy. At the same time, it makes the nation, itself, an instrument in the coming of the millennium. Moreover, especially in situations of conflict, the claim that God was on one’s side often involved demonizing the enemy. For Beecher, the demonic enemy or “other” was a Roman Catholic conspiracy to spread “Romanism” across the American west.

It was the **Mormons**, however, who gave the fullest expression to the idea of America as the site of the millennium. The prophecies and Book of Mormon delivered to Joseph Smith and his subsequent organization of the Mormon Church marked the beginning of “the end times” as the formal name of the new religion, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints,” makes unmistakably clear. After violent persecution in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, Brigham Young led the Mormons into the wilderness of Utah and there established a new city upon a hill, a new Zion which as Conrad Cherry put it “was the Holy City in the wilderness [that] was for Young the gathering place for the Saints from which they would radiate influences that would turn the entire American continent, and eventually the world into God’s Zion.”

The idea that God had chosen the British colonies for a special destiny received a major reformulation with the American Revolution and the establishment of the United States as a new and unique, independent nation, a *Novus Ordo Seclorum*—a new secular order. The clergy, especially the Calvinistic New England clergy, was very much a Patriot clergy that probably played a greater role in mobilizing support for the revolution than the innumerable anti-British pamphlets produced between 1765 and 1776. For the most part, their advocacy of the patriot cause was cast in familiar form of the Jeremiad: sermons insisted that God had visited the injustices and tyrannies Parliament and Crown employed to “reduce” the colonists to “slavery,” because of the awful sinfulness into which they had fallen. God required repentance and a new fidelity to “the Sacred Cause of Liberty.” By 1789, with the adoption of the Constitution and the inauguration of George Washington as president, the new nation itself was invested with a special meaning and mission. Americans did not consider their new nation to be simply another nation among nations, but a providentially blessed entity charged to develop and maintain itself as the beacon of liberty and democracy to the world.

As is well known, not only was the United States remarkably diverse religiously, its new Constitution, with the first amendment of the Bill of Rights, also established a clear separation of church and state, expressly forbidding the institution of an established Church. It was formally a secular nation—though at the same time a deeply religious society—sustained by Divine will, whose citizens were expected to subscribe to its founding principals with religious like devotion. In effect, what emerged was a sacralized notion of the new nation and the development of what various scholars have termed a powerful “Civil Religion,” a particular form of cultural nationalism to which all “true” Americans, whether native or immigrant born and whatever their personal religious beliefs and affiliations, were expected to adhere. In this sense the United States can be considered a “creedal” society, unified less by geographical boundaries which continually shifted, and more by a set of specified doctrines inscribed in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, to which all citizens of the nation gave their allegiance. The new democratic republic, proclaimed as unique, had been ordained by God and endowed with a special mission to be the new “city upon a hill” to shine the beacon of liberty upon the world—and, at times if deemed necessary, to spread its form of democracy by force of arms to other parts of the world. Quickly were the revolutionary leaders, especially George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, elevated into Founding Fathers, and the Declaration and Constitution turned into almost sacred relics. Essential to the story, of course, was the apotheosis of “the god-like” Washington into American Moses who led his people out of bondage into a land of liberty. Thus was the new nation and, to some extent, its people, “chosen.” “While such familiar language as ‘promised land’ and ‘city upon a hill’ are only biblical allusions,” as religious historian John Wilson has put it, “the master image or figure which frames and sets their true content, is the type of Israel as God’s chosen people. Thus the apparently secularized expressions [of these phrases] have a deeper resonance which locates the origins of the American mission very precisely even when they are not explicitly elaborated.”

Such are the basic outlines of the idea of America’s “chosenness” and providential destiny and mission that not only underlay the invocation of the nation’s “Manifest Destiny” as the rationale for the United States to extend its boundaries to the Pacific Ocean. It is also the constellation of ideas that has informed American nationalism and its actions at home and abroad to this day. As noted, it was explicitly used it to justify the Spanish American War and its accompanying imperialist goals. President Woodrow Wilson invoked it to call Americans to fight to make the world “safe for democracy,” as did President Franklin Roosevelt, when in World War II he rallied the American public behind the war against Fascist and Nazi Europeans and imperial Japan. It was also a mainstay of the Cold War: in fact, the phrase “under God” was only added to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 at the height of the Cold War. The sense of American uniqueness and mission also underlay John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address. And President George W. Bush, considering himself to be an agent of divine will, has defended his policies in Iraq by invoking the idea that it is America’s duty and destiny to conquer terrorism and to secure democracy for Iraq and help spread it to other nations of the Middle East.

Not surprisingly, however, it remained for Abraham Lincoln to provide the most complex but nonetheless clear statement of the idea that America has a sacred duty to itself and to the world to preserve and protect liberty and democracy. In 1837, as a young man of 28, Lincoln gave an address to the Springfield, Illinois Lyceum. It was a time of great social and political turmoil. Illinois was riven with violence over the question of the abolition of slavery. In Alton, Illinois an anti-abolitionist mob recently had murdered the abolitionist editor, Elijah Lovejoy, destroyed his printing press and burned his office and house. In this atmosphere of intense political strife, Lincoln used his Lyceum address to call his fellow Illinoisans (and Americans) to turn to the basic democratic and liberal tenets the American national creed—the American Civil Religion—and embrace them and hold them as deeply as they held their private religious beliefs. Only such a common national faith, he argued, could provide the real and lasting foundation that would hold the sprawling, diverse, and conflict-ridden nation together.

During the Civil War Lincoln found these beliefs sharply challenged and at the same time gave them their most eloquent and powerful expression. Lincoln had always kept his questioning and often skeptical spirituality closely guarded, but as the war ground relentlessly on, his beliefs and speeches took on not a sectarian but a deeply Old Testament tone. The cadence and words of his Gettysburg Address accentuate his message: for the living, “the last best hope of earth,” was fighting for the sacred cause of liberty. “It is for the Union,” he declared, “to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last true measure of devotion . . . 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.”

In his brief second inaugural address, delivered only six weeks before his assassination, Lincoln explored the relationship between American freedom and Divine Will. He knew that nations often, if not always, claimed God or the Gods for their side. So, acknowledging that “neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained,” Lincoln addressed the fact that both North and South invoked God as their partisan: “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other.” But he made it unmistakably clear that though he did not and could not really know God’s Will, he did know that God intended to end slavery, no matter what it took. Lincoln powerfully invoked a Jeremiad like vision of an all powerful and deeply offended God that would reign “woe” down upon those by peoples through “whom the offense cometh.” “If we suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses,” he declared, “which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God ascribe to Him?” Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray,” Lincoln continued, “that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said, . . . so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’” Here it all is: the idea that the United States represents “the last best hope” that—the belief that an all powerful, not fully comprehensible God, governs the affairs of humankind, and that this God held the whole nation, not just the South, accountable for the existence of slavery in its midst, for the violation of its appointed mission. Finally, unlike most proponents of the idea that “America is a nation called to a special destiny by God,” he refrains from claiming God as the agent of Northern victory, even though as the second inaugural makes clear he had come to believe the Almighty was the ultimate agent of “the mighty scourge of war” that He had visited upon the nation for the sin of slavery.

Guiding Student Discussion

At first glance, it may seem rather difficult to engage students in a discussion of religion and Manifest Destiny. I usually do not like to start with contemporary issues and perspectives or with the students’ beliefs, but on this topic I have found it to be effective. Teaching strategies will obviously depend on the particular composition of your classes. In a classroom in Queens, New York (the most diverse political jurisdiction in the country) well over half its students or their parents are likely to be born outside of the United States and at least half will adhere to faiths other than Christianity. Clearly a very different student population than a teacher in Troy, Ohio, for example, might face. Perhaps the best initial strategy is to open up the issues the topic raises: questions of nationalism and cultural unity; questions of the relationship between belief in an all powerful, superintending God and the actions of nations; questions of what happens when nations claim an expansive mission and justify this with their own Divine favor?

You might begin by asking your students if they think that the various peoples of the United States with all their ethnic, religious, and racial diversity subscribe to anything that might be called “a common faith” and what beliefs it consists of and how it operates as a faith, does it seem to require some kind of belief in God. You could ask how many of them participate in various rituals of America’s supposed Civil Religion, e.g. Fourth of July, Memorial Day, the Pledge of Allegiance. At this point a particularly astute student might point out that the stars and stripes of the flag only refer to the original 13 and the present 50 states of the union and that the flag doesn’t seem to have any religious references at all. Do they consider the United States to be unique in its basic values of liberty and democracy and to have a “mission” to preserve and promote them? Do many or any of them believe that God does play a role in the action and fate of nations? What have been various consequences when the United States (and other nations) claims a special providence and mission from God?

This discussion should lead into a more historically oriented discussion that can best be conducted through the use of key primary documents. Winthrop’s speech on the *Arbella*, the Declaration of Independence, and Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and his second inaugural address work especially well. Conrad Cherry, *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, is a superb anthology with three centuries of primary documents on religious interpretations of American destiny. The introductions to the various sections and documents are also especially helpful.

Scholars Highlight

The vast scholarly literature that bears on this subject is less a debate than a range of works on different periods and from different disciplines and perspectives. An indispensable source and the best place to begin is Conrad Cherry, *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (1998). On Manifest Destiny itself, two older books, Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny* (1958) and Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in America* (1963) remain useful. But see also Sam Haynes and Christopher Morris, eds. *Manifest Destiny and Empire* (1977). Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956) remains an essential source for the Puritan sense of mission. The concept of “Civil Religion” was introduced into American scholarship by Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus*, Winter 1967, is a beautifully written and illuminating article. See also John Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture* (1979) and Martin Marty, ed. *Civil Religion, Church and State* (1992). See also Nathan Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (1977); Earnest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (1968); and H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (1959). On particular topics, Jan Shipp, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (1985) and James H. Moorhead, *Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860-1869* (1979), are particularly useful.

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