
The Almost-Chosen People

Paul Johnson

When Abraham Lincoln called Americans “the almost-chosen people,” he used an apt phrase, as valid now as when he coined it a hundred and forty years ago. It perfectly expresses the close but at the same time slightly uneasy relationship between the American republic and the religious spirit. That the Americans are exceptional in their attitude to religion is obvious to all, and never more so than today. But visitors from old Europe are struck by the way in which high church attendance 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” that “*religion brought forth prosperity, and the daughter destroyed the mother. . . . There is danger lest the enchantments of this world make them forget their errand into the wilderness.*”

The notion of a chosen but flawed people is directly related to America’s historical origins, for the first settlers were undoubtedly animated by a sense of divine mission. The work most widely read among them, after the Bible, was Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, which vigorously expressed the dynamic myth that the English were the Elect Nation. In the sixteenth and seventeenth 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 being 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 most tenaciously held among the Protestant sectarians, especially the colonists. The explorer and navigator John Davis stated, “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 unto these Gentiles in the sea, to those Isles and famous Kingdoms, there to preach the peace of the Lord.” The Virginia colony was to be the greatest experiment in post-European Christianity. In a sermon to the Virginia Company in 1622, the poet John Donne, dean of St. Paul’s, declared, “Act over the Acts of the Apostles; be you a Light to the Gentiles, that sit in darkness. 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.” Governor Winthrop, sailing the Atlantic on the *Arabella*, wrote, “We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.”

It was inevitable that such elect nation-builders should place their government in a religious frame. So, in a sense, did all Christian nations. But where, 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 civill body politic.”

No one who studies the key constitutional documents in American history can doubt for a moment the central and organic part played by religion in the origins and development of American republican government. The 1639 “Fundamental Orders of Connecticut”—the first written constitution in the modern sense of the term drawn up by popular convention and the first to embody the democratic idea—states in its prolegomena that the state owes its origin to “the wise disposition of the divine

PAUL JOHNSON is the author of landmark works of history, philosophy, and religion. This essay was delivered as the first of the annual Erasmus Lectures sponsored by FIRST THINGS and the Institute on Religion and Public Life.

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."

The same principle, that the Bible was to supply any defect or omission in the written law, was articulated in the first New England law code, the Massachusetts Body of Liberties of 1641, which was based on "humanity, civility, and Christianity." It did not seem possible to these founders to distinguish between government on the one hand 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."

The danger was that such quasi-religious societies would become total societies on the medieval Christian model, tolerating no dissent from established creeds. But they did not do so. Even the churches were run by laypeople, not by the clergy. So they stressed morals and behavior rather than theology and doctrine.

Since religious establishments were popular rather than hieratic, a distinctive American religious tradition began to emerge. There was never any sense of division in law between laity and clergy, between those with spiritual privileges and those without—no jealous confrontation between a secular and an ecclesiastical world. America was born Protestant and did not have to become so through revolt and struggle. It was not built on the remains of a Catholic Church or an establishment; it had no clericalism or anticlericalism. In all these respects it differed profoundly from the old world, which had been shaped by Augustinian principles and violent reaction to them. The word secular never had the same significance in America as in Europe because the word clerical had never conveyed an image of intolerance and privilege. America had a traditionless tradition, making a fresh start with a set of Protestant assumptions, taken for granted, self-evident, as the basis for a common national creed.

In any case, in a frontier society it was impossible to preserve sectarian discipline and uniformity: dissenters simply moved on. Roger Williams broke away from strict New England Calvinism to found Providence, Rhode Island, which he called "a shelter for persons distressed for conscience." His 1644 constitution defined "the form of government established in

Providence Plantations as 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 1663 charter puts it, "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 concerns."

It is important to grasp that American society embraced the principles of voluntarism and tolerance in faith 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 bifurcated as early as the 1650s. While England was debating whether to have a Presbyterian or a Congregationalist settlement, and then in practice getting an Anglican one, the former governor of Massachusetts, Sir Henry Vane, was expounding the principles of civil and religious liberty, arguing 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 forebear intermeddling with giving rule or imposing in those matters." This document, and the sentiments it articulated, were more instrumental in determining the spirit of the American Constitution in religious matters than were the writings of the Enlightenment.

It is probably true that the American Revolution was in essence the political and military expression of a religious movement. Certainly those who inspired it and carried it through believed they were doing God's will. Its emotional dynamic was the Great Awakening, which began in the 1730s. The man who first preached it, Jonathan Edwards, 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 were, to his way of thinking, no more than realized eschatology. He said he saw no reason why God should not "establish a constitution" whereby human creatures should cooperate with him and all might know that the hour was coming when God "shall take the kingdom"; he looked for "the dawn of that glorious day."

Edwards saw religion as the essential unifying force in American society, and that force was personified in his evangelical successor George Whitefield. Until this time America was a series of very different states with little contact with each other, often with stronger links to Europe than to their neighbors. Religious evangelism was the first continental phenomenon, transcending differences between the colonies, dissolving state boundaries, and introducing truly national figures. Whitefield was the first American 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 and to a great extent a Protestant ethic, infinitely more important than the purely dogmatic variations of the sects.

It is worth remembering that the key state in the formation of the union—Pennsylvania—was the most diverse in religion. It was a Presbyterian stronghold, the headquarters of the Baptists, a state in which Anglicanism was strong and Catholicism flourished, home to a variety of Mennonites, Moravians, and German pietists, as well as the founding Quakers. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were thus framed in an appropriate setting (it was also the center of America's economic communications). The institution of religious freedom and of a state that did not distinguish between 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 the 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. Children, servants, women and men are all professors in the science of public as well as private morality. . . . 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, and it insists that men have the right to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" because they are so "endowed by their Creator." The authors appeal, in their conclusion, to "the Supreme judge of the world" and express their confidence in "the Protection of Divine Providence."

Equally, those who were called to govern the new state saw it as a political society within a religious framework. Washington began his first inaugural address 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 added that in "tendering this homage to the great Author of every public and private good" he was certain he was expressing 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 finally 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 one who supported 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 nineteenth century the cold, secularizing wind that progressively denuded government in Europe 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, just as the Revolution

was 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 the most characteristic element in American political philosophy—the belief that the providential plan and the workings of democracy are organically linked.

As he made clear in his first inaugural address, 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? Is there any better or equal hope in the world? . . . 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.” He added that “intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him who has never yet forsaken this favoured land” could still solve “our present difficulty.”

When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, he appealed both to world opinion and God for approval; or, as the text has it, “I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind and the gracious favour of Almighty God.” Lincoln confided to his cabinet that the timing was determined by what he considered to be divine intervention in the Battle of Antietam. 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.”

Probably no man ever reflected more deeply on the relationship between religion and politics than Lincoln, the archetypal American statesman. To clarify his own thought, he wrote on a slip of paper, “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; and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true; that God wills this contest and wills that it should not end yet. 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.”

These reflections he recast into a famous passage in his second inaugural address. It is impossible to imagine Lincoln’s European contemporaries Napoleon III, Bismarck, Gambetta, Thiers, Garibaldi, Gavour, Marx, or Disraeli thinking in these terms. Gladstone, it is true, might have done so, but he would not have ventured to publicize his thinking in a critical address—or even to his cabinet colleagues. Lincoln did so in the certainty that most of his countrymen and women could and did think along similar lines.

It is because religion was the determining factor in the two decisive events of American history, the Revolution and the Civil War, that Americans have continued to accord it a special place in their political process, both at the popular and at the highest level. At the time of the Spanish-American War and the annexation of the Philippines, President McKinley said he was “not ashamed” to admit to a gathering of his fellow Methodists that “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 Philipinos and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God’s grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow men for whom Christ also died.”

No European imperialist, whether a Joseph Chamberlain or a Jules Ferr or a King Leopold, would have dared to justify himself in such a manner, rightly fearing accusations of humbug. But McKinley was patently sincere; no American thought otherwise. No wonder, then, that President Wilson, the first American head of state to operate on the European scene, seemed so rich and strange a figure to European politicians. Keynes, observing him at the Versailles Peace Conference, did not see him as 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.”

I believe Keynes’ reaction was typical of Europeans. Even today, if European observers were asked to single out what they believe to be the single most pervasive characteristic of American public men in this century, I think they would point to the quasi-religious character of their rhetoric, whether that of a puritan like Coolidge or a Catholic like Kennedy, men of strong faith like Hoover and Reagan or cynics like Roosevelt and Johnson.

For the truth is, the political culture of the United States is strongly religious, and the reason why it is religious, unlike Europe's, 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 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 held that 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 more than a century later by President Eisenhower, probably as typical of mid-twentieth-century American religious attitudes as Lincoln was of those prevailing in the mid-nineteenth century. Eisenhower said in 1954 that "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith." He added—and this is still more characteristic—"and I don't care what it is."

Eisenhower's indifference to credal 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, and their competition for souls mirrored the competition of firms for business in the market economy. In both cases the role of the state was to hold the ring and make that competition fair. The First Amendment no more made America a secular state than its antitrust legislation made it a socialist state. By the twentieth century, the American republic had come to rest on a tripod of forces: religion, democracy, and capitalism. All were mutually supportive; each would fall without the others. Indeed, any two would fall without the third. When Coolidge said that "the business of America is business," he might equally well have added "and the religion of America is religion." That was exactly what Eisenhower meant.

The positive merits of American religious pluralism explain why the growth of the state education system never became, as in Europe, a source of conflict. It was nonsectarian without being nonreligious, and its moving spirit, Horace Mann, contended that 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 makeup 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. So the American Way of Life came to be adopted as the official philosophy of American state education.

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 exactly with their interests. In the 1850s the Irish, nearly all of them Catholics, constituted 35.2 percent of all immigrants, and altogether over 3.5 million of them went to America to escape Protestant government and Protestant landlordism. 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, "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. In the years 1881 to 1914 over two million of them came to the United States, constituting ten percent of all immigrants in the early years of the twentieth 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 1940s, there is little doubt that most of the victims of the Holocaust would have found refuge there, just as in recent decades millions of persecuted Catholics from Indochina and Cuba have equated religious freedom with American citizenship. In the 1980s, 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.

Such a country cannot accurately be described as a secular state; indeed, it is America's continuing role as the primary refuge of the persecuted that underlines its religious exceptionalism.

Equally important is the way in which the religious impulse maintains its importance in the dynamics of American public life. This has its negative as well as its positive aspects, however; for if religion is a unifying force by underpinning republicanism and democracy, it can also be a divisive one. Indeed, it is often both at the same time. The first Great Awakening inspired the Revolution and so created America. But it also divided colonial society: A quarter of the nation remained neutral; a quarter was loyalist—forty thousand of them migrated to Canada. The second Great Awakening abolished slavery and launched and won the Civil War, 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 (1875 to 1914) produced that great, unsuccessful, and tragic experiment in social engineering Prohibition, which divided the nation in half, set town against country, Catholic against Protestant, native against immigrant, and Middle America against the rest.

What we are seeing now is a fourth Great Awakening, and it too is proving divisive in some ways. In no period has American exceptionalism been more marked, have American religious patterns diverged more sharply from those of the West as a whole, than in the twentieth century. In Europe, nearly all religions were in numerical decline by 1914, a trend never since reversed. In Britain, for instance, church attendance, as a percentage of the population, peaked in the 1880s (as did institutional atheism). In the United States, church affiliation was 43 percent of the population in 1910 and in 1920; but by 1940 it was 49 percent, rising to 55 percent in 1950 and 59 percent in 1960, then falling to 62.4 percent a decade later. 1970

The postwar afflatus, followed by a relative decline that has continued in the mainline churches, has concealed a steady and cumulatively formidable growth in religious conservatism, most marked in the Protestant churches but by no means confined to them. The fourth Great Awakening has gathered speed slowly but now appears to be maturing. Like its predecessors, it is having political consequences, the first being the phenomenon of Reaganism and the revulsion from the liberal collectivism of the 1960s and 1970s. What seems to have happened is that as the mainline churches began to decline, they sought the mutual protection of ecumenicalism through the National and World Council of Churches and the common political platform of ever more extreme forms of liberalism. This move provoked an angry conservative response from their disenfranchised rank and file that took the form of a new and nonelitist variety of ecumenicalism, a de facto unity that stretches across the sects and even into Catholicism.

This popular ecumenicalism is based upon a common reassertion of traditional moral values and of belief in the salient articles of Christianity not as symbols but as plain historical facts. What is unusual about this fourth Awakening is that for the first time it embraces Catholics. Indeed, it appeals to many non-practicing 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. It reminds 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. Thus, while 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. [FT]