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PUBLIC RELIGION IN AMERICAN CULTURE

## Chapter 2

### THE SHAPE OF THE NATIONAL COVENANT

In the preceding chapter we identified a recent religious development in American culture: the erosion of a set of general assumptions identified as the religious aspects of the national community, or the public religion of America. Certainly the content of this public religion had not remained constant across the preceding years of national life; Will Herberg's delineation of the "American Way of Life" in the 1950s was significantly different from the pure Christianity that a century earlier James Dixon had believed to be at the center of the society. Nor was it that critics of public religion and sceptics about its status were active for the first time; Madison, to take the best example, valued the social achievement of religious pluralism as much as did any mid-twentieth century counterpart. What occurred were pronounced shifts in public attitudes and actions. In the 1960s a markedly secularized attitude toward religion came to dominate popular culture. This basic development provided the occasion for serious discussion of the civil religion question.

Concurrent with this change in popular perceptions was a shift in the understanding of religion among intellectuals. The development of social theory, following from the work of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, entailed new ways of conceptualizing the place of religion in societies. The religious aspect of cultures came to receive un-

precedented attention. If to the popular mind indifferent attitudes toward religion were increasingly commonplace, in the abstract discussions of social theoreticians religion had never seemed more relevant to the perseverance of societies and the viability of cultures. While different authors proposed distinctive formulations of the issue, the general position was broadly espoused that religions, or something very much like religious legitimations of basic patterns of belief and behavior, seem to be central to social structures. This appeared to hold for "complex" and extensive, as well as for "simple" and small-scale, societies. Although the most attractive formulations of this position diverged in particulars, the theoretical point was single and compelling: any durable society seems to possess important collective religious aspects instrumental in its achievement of coherence and in its continuing viability. Thus, the recent discussion of public religion, although occasioned by general developments in popular culture, has received its specific form and shape from contemporaneous counter-currents within essentially academic circles.

This point may be underscored by giving brief attention to several influential formulations—one by a cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, and one by a sociologist, Peter Berger. The details of each version are less significant for this discussion than the broadly common insight that, to use a spatial image, religion establishes horizons for a culture, orienting the collectivity and the individuals who compose it through time and across social space. Religion sets the forms in which thought takes place and condenses the values which guide behavior. Within this framework, religion is viewed as a *condition* for culture at the same time that it is perceived in terms of a set of discrete phenomena within it.

In one influential essay, Peter Berger and his collaborator Thomas Luckmann summarized and synthesized recent discussion in the sociology of knowledge bearing on this point. *The Social Construction of Reality* argues that humans necessarily exist in a dialectical relationship with their "worlds," at once experiencing the worlds as given, while engaging in activity which recreates and sustains them.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the "real" world exists only in the knowledge of it that individuals and collectivities share and reproduce. From this point of view, all kinds of knowledge—from the hard physical sciences at one extreme to realms of human creativity and meaning at the other—share common formal properties. The collaborators diverge in their interpretations at this point. Luckmann assumes that a universe of meaning is religious by virtue of its function, whether or not it makes manifest religious references.<sup>2</sup> Berger, by contrast, is committed to a more substantive definition of religion; in theory his position allows for "universes of meaning" not explicitly religious to arise from the social dialectic which produces and sustains each cosmos.<sup>3</sup>

Resolution of the point at issue between these two authors is not immediately relevant to our present inquiry, for the perception common to both is that a society acquires and maintains its legitimacy over time and through space on the basis of a meaning system which has been, empirically or historically speaking, most frequently religious. On this view we might expect to discover public religion, or cultural equivalents for it, in all social systems. "Religion legitimates social institutions by bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by *locating* them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference."<sup>4</sup> In this sense, religion may be perceived as basic to or fundamental within a culture; indeed, in this respect it

gives definition to a culture. Above all, this line of analysis makes clear why it is important to locate and identify the special, if not exclusive, characteristics of religion within culture.

An influential essay by Clifford Geertz is helpful at this point. "Religion as a Cultural System" indicates how certain anthropologists have come to define particular aspects of culture as religious.<sup>5</sup> In form, the essay is an extended exposition of a particular definition of religion. Geertz suggests at the outset that:

A religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.<sup>6</sup>

While a stipulative definition of this kind does not gain universal assent even among cultural anthropologists, the form of this proposal has been extremely useful in pointing to the location of religion and the specific roles attributed to religion in a culture. Further, in theory this approach may be applied to internally diverse, large-scale empires as well as to small-scale, self-contained, and relatively static societies. Finally, the thrust of this definition is not to argue that every culture embodies a religion, but to identify certain issues or problem areas common to cultures where phenomena fruitfully viewed as religious might be studied. Thus, those meanings which situate a collectivity in a cosmos and provide both general orientation and specific motivation for individual and collective behavior are at least religion-like cultural materials, if not

formal religions. These structures of meaning and value are fundamentally *symbolic* rather than rational. Furthermore, rather than appear as disparate elements, they compose a coherent set, or constitute a cult.

The relevance of such an approach to analysis of public religion is obvious. The discussion of civil religion to date has exemplified how there might be located in American culture some of the materials which maintain the social and cultural systems in the ways Peter Berger and Clifford Geertz have proposed. Since religion is specific to a collectivity, it is not surprising that the relevant American materials should carry the imprint of the Biblical or Hebraic tradition so deeply influential in western societies.<sup>7</sup> The symbolism which predominates in this great tradition is very much historical in cast. In particular, the interpretation of change through time is the central problematic, and the direction and significance of that change is identified and expressed through emphasis upon the origin and destiny of the society, or its beginning and end. Further, the Biblical tradition is markedly realistic. Meaning is identified through dramatic figures who act out intentions common to the collectivity through particular events fraught with special significance.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, change through time is not conceived passively, as it is in some cultures where the objective is endurance. Rather, it is viewed actively. Particular subjects, at propitious moments, behave in ways to move the present toward the future out of the past.

Much has been written about the concept of history stemming from the Biblical tradition and about its influence in Western culture through Judaism and Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Discussion of that literature in detail would not materially advance the present analysis. The basic point is that the legitimation public religion has conferred upon

American society, or the type of cosmos public religion has provided within the American cultural system, is a variant of this Western cultural pattern derived from the Bible. This observation suggests why the central symbolism of the American public religion involves myths of the national community's origin and destiny rendered concrete in terms of larger-than-life agents acting through specific events perceived as crucial. These elements, or basic symbols, set a covenantal framework for the American culture. Thus we logically turn to give attention to the basic shape and content of the myths which establish a cosmos with respect to the American nation.

The mythic center of these peculiarly American materials concern corporate destiny or purpose—in a phrase, the national covenant.<sup>10</sup> These materials focus the nation's self-understanding *as a collectivity*. Unquestionably, each national community develops its own sense of particular mission or destiny. Current cultural nationalisms are certainly familiar to us. There are small-scale examples from Africa's recent era of nation-building, and a universalistic case in Soviet Russia as a continental empire. That our particular nation has a strong sense of identity does not comprise the uniqueness of the American materials; there is a distinctiveness, however, in the form and content of the particular national myths. The American materials are characterized by themes which derive from a specifically Christian version of the broadly Biblical tradition. More especially, the comprehensive kingdom-tradition, or millenarian component of Christianity, figures large.<sup>11</sup> The national covenant has been variously conceived. The earliest version, for example, envisioned America as the beginning of the long-expected Christian millennium.<sup>12</sup> As a relatively direct extrapolation of a traditional view, this expectation was current among

English colonists, and it was also held by certain European circles. Alternatively, a more recent construct of the covenant was conceived in terms of the American nation's fulfilling the millennial expectation of the ages.<sup>13</sup> This latter is a more heretical point of view in terms of orthodox Christianity, but it has been a powerful ingredient in American nationalism. In any case, the several versions of the Kingdom myth attributed to the American community have placed the national experience in a universal framework. In all the versions America is placed at center stage in the concluding act of world history.

If this Hebraic sense of historical destiny allied with the Christian image of the millennium has provided the basic form of national identity for the American community, its manifestations have been somewhat more variable, allowing for a wide range of interpretations of the American community and its covenant. Generations of reformers have spoken in millennial terms of more perfect social orders of one sort or another. At times their focus has been political, emphasizing human rights. At other times they have been more interested in economic questions, specifically those concerning rights of property. In some ways, however, the interpretations offered are less important than the mythic patterns on which they are based. Two such patterns can be identified, and clear distinctions drawn between them. On the one hand is the exemplary pattern; on the other is the emissary.<sup>14</sup>

Exemplary versions of America's mission locate the central collective national purpose in America's exhibiting to the world the achievement of a perfected society. This theme, rooted in Puritan self-understanding, was classically articulated by John Winthrop in his address aboard the *Arbella*. The image he developed, as school children know, was that of the "City set on a hill."<sup>15</sup> The root

theological premise is that God has chosen to make an example of a perfected society in the American wilderness for the sake of the old world. This might instruct in His true ways the warring European nations.<sup>16</sup> That explicit theological significance has not necessarily been central in subsequent exemplary constructions of the national mission. Among positive transformations, America has been envisioned as the land of liberty in which democracy has replaced perfected Christian society.<sup>17</sup>

Exemplary constructions have entailed the assumption that this covenanted nation is destined to lead the world through a separation from it. This is the negative side of the exemplary construct: the nation should remain distant from the entanglements of the world for the sake of its continuing purity. Washington's farewell address prominently counseled the republic to avoid entangling alliances.<sup>18</sup> A deep strand of isolationism continued to be very powerful through World War II and threatens even today to influence conduct of foreign relations in a complex multipolar world. This strand in the American mythic collective self-understanding is also rooted in an originating impulse at the foundation of colonial life. It and the more positive version are logical constructions of America's conceptualization of national destiny. Exemplary versions of American collective identity are associated with mission. They are conceived in terms of perfecting a society as a demonstration to the world at large.

The other dominant mythic pattern of national mission might be termed emissary. Here the burden borne by the community is to bring other nations to the truth by the action of the faithful American polity. This pattern is as deeply woven into American culture as the exemplary one.<sup>19</sup> If to the first generation New England was to be a

"city set on a hill," the same settlers undertook not only to Christianize but also to civilize the indigenous Indian cultures. The point in this context is not to offer retrospective moral judgments about cultural interaction, but to stress how the emissary element in American destiny has been as prominent as the exemplary. American myths about collective purpose have rationalized apparently contradictory social goals: intervention in the affairs of other nations, as well as isolation from them: a war to make the world safe for democracy, as well as an example of democracy held forth to the world; and a crusade against atheistic communism, as well as perfection of the covenanted nation as a god-fearing republic.

No less familiar than the basic mythic *form* of mission is the content of presumed end or purpose of the national covenant. The summary term, democracy, has had broad cultural currency since the early national period. The fullest analysis of this ideal in national life was given by Alexis de Toqueville in his celebrated discussion of the new American culture.<sup>20</sup> But the elements of which it was composed had emerged at least by the eighteenth century. Recent scholarship has explored in great detail two aspects of the democracy that was forming in the Revolutionary epoch. On the one hand, the colonial political leaders worked over several decades to adapt British Whig political culture to the colonies so that liberty and property became watchwords of their emerging cause.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the Calvinist-evangelical religious forces secularized the content of the millennial tradition so that achievement of independence and a self-directed republic was the effective content of the anticipated divine Kingdom.<sup>22</sup> Thus an independent political order committed to democracy construed in terms of individual rights to liberty and property *was* the mission of the covenanted nation.

The language of the American political realm has incorporated these values so basically that we do not often reflect upon how innovative they were in the context of the pre-enlightenment European political traditions, which had emphasized the necessity of subjection to authority. To be sure, resistance to tyrants had been discussed in those traditions, and the English had brought down a particular king, although the reign of the line was restored in a decade. But the systematic elaboration of rule by the people as the substance of a nation's high sense of mission and the achievement of a tolerable approximation to that ideal was a signal event in history.

This complex of mythic materials is basic to what we may now recognize as the cultural nationalism of the new republic.<sup>23</sup> These elements are "givens." Conflict does develop in American history over interpretation of them. In particular, the *degree* of union made necessary by the covenant and the implications of the ideals with respect to race led to bloody and bitter civil strife in the 1860s. But the struggle was over *interpretation* of the basic mythic substratum. The cultural nationalism was simply subject to different constructions. This plasticity of the myths is made all the more evident by reflection upon the struggles for civil rights in the 1960s. Conservatives feared the radicalism, thinking it inspired by Communist ideals, or perhaps by third-world struggles. But it was amply evident in the collapse of radical activities that, although a few leaders may have been inspired by other cultural traditions, the recruits to the cause and the consequent power of the movement came from the complex of fundamental American democratic myths.

The content of American cultural nationalism is democracy, and it may assume both exemplary and emissary forms. The mythic elaboration places this realized and

secularized millennium in a broadly historical setting. Thus mythic materials incorporate an explanatory reference to their origin. Turned in this way, the basic theme is one of chosenness. America has been selected for its covenant, or mission. In this respect the form of the myth is also ineradicably Hebraic, for ancient Israel provides the dominant model for a community bearing this burden of historical destiny. It is common knowledge that the founding generation conceived of America as "God's New Israel."<sup>24</sup> The number of sermons in the revolutionary epoch constructed around this mythic identity is remarkable, and their explicitness on this point is striking. The directness of the identification is diminished in the subsequent elaboration of the culture, but allusions and references to America as Israel suffuse even apparently secular materials.<sup>25</sup> While at one level such familiar language as "promised land" and "city set on a hill" are only biblical allusions, 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 have a deeper resonance which locates the origins of the American mission very precisely even when they are not explicitly elaborated.

It would be an error, however, to assume that mythic constructs were directly derived from the Bible, or that, in this case, the myths relating to Israel as "chosen people" were not already elaborated as received. To explore the best example, the image of Israel as a nation chosen of God had already undergone significant adaptation: a basic element in the Puritan construction of an alternative future for England was its election by God as the new Israel.<sup>26</sup> This was most directly developed in John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, which had explicitly identified England as God's chosen instrument within the scheme of universal

redemption, and it was applied and refined in the trials of the English Civil Wars.<sup>27</sup> So English Puritan mythology stands directly behind and contributes to the forming of the American sense of its origins. In its collective self-understanding, America becomes, so to speak, the third, and presumably last, Israel following England's faithlessness.

If American myths of origin develop this basic tradition of chosenness rooted in Israel's self-understanding, they also synthesize additional figures or images. From the broadly classical tradition associated with Rome, America derived myths of republican ideals and virtues.<sup>28</sup> From this same source came the tradition of political universalism through the heritage of the empire and joined to a strain of salvific universalism from the Christian tradition. So in the mythic construct the mission flows from many origins which, however disjunctive in their sources, have become synthesized into a cultural nationalism centered in the American covenant.

Mythic elaboration of the sense of mission within the culture, including understanding of its origin, is relatively abstract. The powerful hold of these images upon the public comes through their being rendered highly specific. The specificity derives from larger-than-life figures who are believed to have acted in critical ways to create the nation and from particular events in which the mythic material is condensed or focussed. In the dynamics of religious symbolism founding figures are extremely important.<sup>29</sup> The founder creates and establishes the cosmos which provides a framework of general intelligibility for the collectivity. This is especially true in the case of religions in the Hebraic tradition, with their emphasis on history as linear development from a beginning to an end. Moses is the archetype, of course, and remains a human

figure of larger-than-life proportions: though he has ascended the holy mountain and communed with God, he is barred from entering the promised land. Major religions deriving from the Hebraic tradition certainly identify founders, among whom Jesus and Muhammad are the best known figures. In important respects, even minor movements within the broader tradition develop self-definitions in terms of the particular originators of their ways. Martin Luther and John Wesley are examples of relatively recent reformers who have been elevated as founders of Christian movements. Since they are readily accessible as persons through rich historical materials, we know of their well-documented ambivalence toward their roles.<sup>30</sup> We must assume no less about all founders, especially those remote in space and time.<sup>31</sup>

Among the outsized historico/mythic figures of American national culture, George Washington is pre-eminent: "First in War, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen." The remarkable consideration is that in the course of his lifetime, Washington had *become* a mythic figure.<sup>32</sup> His achievements as military leader in the struggle for independence cast him as a young Moses leading his people out of captivity. Like Moses, having achieved success in the one role, he pressed on to lead his people to a subsequent goal, a promised land. Interesting questions can be raised about the degree to which Washington's very status as legendary figure transcending petty disputes was itself a major factor in the achievement of a viable new nation. Whatever the estimate of that issue, his role as two-term president who relinquished power voluntarily assured the further elaboration of his mythic stature. In the compounding of the legend, Washington not only served as the American Moses, but as well fulfilled the type represented by Joshua. Indeed, the type of

Jesus as divine-human was not altogether beyond the collective American imagination. The play of mythic imagination easily encompassed his mother, Mary, so inevitably identified with the mother of Jesus. (In this respect Martha, the wife, posed more problems.)

Washington, the Father of his country, is the dominant figure of the mythic national materials. But he is not alone in the pantheon of American national cult figures.<sup>33</sup> Political leaders who have contributed to American national success at turning points in its history have been elevated to this status. Jefferson more clearly than Hamilton or Madison is a legendary figure within the culture. Jackson is far more prominent than others who followed the first generation.<sup>34</sup> Certainly Lincoln, who in his death embraced the ambiguity of coerced union, was thereby transfigured more than Grant, the victorious military leader in civil war.<sup>35</sup> Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson represent the American achievement of stature among the nations and are more central to the cult of the national covenant than, shall we say, William Jennings Bryan. Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Dwight D. Eisenhower, for different reasons, more clearly belong to this circle than does Harry S. Truman. In his death John F. Kennedy, like Lincoln, was immediately transfigured, while Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon to this point remain outside the cult through defeat and disgrace, respectively.

It is the nature of the presidential office in the American polity for its incumbents to be prime candidates for mythic stature within the national self-understanding. But others can be transfigured to become part of the covenant. Martin Luther King is a fine example in our own time of a leader who created conflict within the social order. Through transcending that conflict in death, however, he became

symbol for an enlarged understanding of the national community so that it could embrace as its true ends many of the goals he pursued. The basis for creation of mythic national figures is popular perception that the community is decisively enlarged through his or her contribution. This is certainly why Jackson was the symbol of his age. We should probably view extra-political figures like Edison or Lindberg in this same perspective. Individuals associated with conflict-producing stress within the social fabric can also become part of the national mythos. While in their lifetimes "barons" like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie are viewed as threats in a way Edison and the early Lindberg are viewed as benign, they become transformed through philanthropic legacies and historical distance.<sup>36</sup>

The identities of mythic figures derive from the contributions they seem to make to the history of the national community. They move the nation toward the fulfillment of its ostensible mission. In this sense the legendary figures are linked to mythic events even as the national origin is linked to its presumed destiny. In this respect the central event is in the founding of the community. Strictly speaking, from a critical historical perspective, the founding of this nation cannot be highly localized or sharply circumscribed in space and time. Recent work has made it clear that the American war for independence follows a long period of increasing development of colonial society as well as progressive alienation from England in narrowly political terms.<sup>37</sup> Systematic overt opposition appears at least by 1760 and fitfully continues for over one half a century. But in the mythic world, the central events take place in 1776, when resolve is manifested to make a decisive break with England—that is, to declare independence. No matter that it takes a decade and a half to

secure the territory and to develop a government at once adequate to political needs and acceptable to the contending colonial sovereignties. A mythic construction of the event works to interpret and condense the significance of large-scale transformations by means of attention to particular changes which come to stand for the whole. This process is similar to the way Washington's achievement in its legendary version—to lead the colonial insurgents to military victory as well as to preside over consolidation of political authority—works to exclude all other claimants. Perhaps a subsequent mythic figure of a scale roughly comparable to Washington could arise only with a new generation celebrating the reorientation of the national community away from the seaboard and embracing with systematic conquest the inner continent. Jackson, then, is the first public figure after Washington to achieve remotely comparable stature. By comparison, Jefferson's achievements lack the focus provided by decisive transformation of the society, however interesting he remains to intellectuals and however attractive to idealists.

Certainly a number of events contribute to the definition of the national community in the ante-bellum period. Defending national integrity against the British in the War of 1812, augmenting the territory of the community through diplomacy, purchase, force, removing indigenous peoples from their lands and clustering them on reservations, incorporating colonizers from other nations as well as increased numbers of immigrants—all are mundane events at one level. Each, however, is transformed as it enters the mythic realm of American collective self-understanding. Each comes to be understood in terms of the national mission and becomes interpreted through the national covenant. All of these events, however, pale before the symbol of the bloody civil struggle. Certainly

division over slavery and economic rivalry were the immediate causes of the War between the States. With respect to the national community, however, the struggle became most basically a battle for possession of the covenant.<sup>38</sup> The union was preserved on northern terms, thereby subordinating the South for a century. Slavery was abolished, but by conspiring to assign second-class status to blacks. In this framework, the national covenant is the moral claim that the community continues as elect under divine authorization. So the Civil War sanctified the nation through the terrible blood sacrifice of lives. Thus purified, the nation was prepared for missions which quite literally have reached around the globe.

The Spanish skirmish, entrance into European interstate struggles, a world war on two fronts, and finally the role of leading of the "forces of light" arrayed against those of "darkness" in a Cold War—are all events which took place within the nation's mythic self-understanding and thereby came under the national covenant. Thus, America in the mid-decades of this century had a pathetically sure sense of its destiny. This is the symbolic, or mythic, background to the trauma of war in Southeast Asia. The American nation, in a classical reversal of roles, experienced the frustration of empire in trying to control an indigenous revolution at the periphery of its sphere of influence. The mythic self-understanding of the American collectivity was expressed in the national covenant; the self-serving and self-aggrandizing aspects of that covenant lie starkly revealed in the agony of the Vietnam War.

In this symbol world of mythic constructs the national collectivity is identified through origins and destinies, heroic figures, and significant events. The master image is the covenanted nation. But while the form of that construct and its appearance connote antiquity and constancy,

the reality of the national community is forever changing. This means that each generation has collectively "owned the covenant" in a rather different sense than was true of the faithful in colonial Puritan life.<sup>39</sup> Mythic symbolic constructs always represent given social interests and reflect contemporary issues. Therefore the national covenant is continuously undergoing accommodation or revision. It has been malleable and plastic, even fluid, rather than brittle, set, or constrained. In this sense, the covenant has no independence from the national culture—indeed it is perhaps the most distinctive and condensed expression of it.

This substantial cultural legacy of myth about the national community is the fundamental means through which religious understanding has been a continuing part of American public life. These mythic materials illustrate how even American secular collective self-understanding has been freighted with religious significance. In effect, these materials have created and preserved religious identity for the nation. As myth they have located American society in a cosmic framework and have oriented both collective and individual activity within it. This understanding of the nation as a covenanted community has been the basic religious aspect of the culture.