

patterns of sexual relationships, expectations governing participation in community affairs and numerous other areas of social life are behaviors that take place at the interfaces between groups and the broader society. Issues of this sort are especially prone to puritan constructions. In this sense puritanism is a stereotypical or coded response particularly characteristic of American society.

Puritanisms have provided one kind of religious meaning for American society. In the first instance, it has been a set of expectations about their own behavior that individuals and groups have adopted for themselves. In this sense it has concerned control of self and through discipline has become finally self-control. But frequently it has also included the aspect of control over other selves—that is, the exercise of social control over deviant individuals and groups. In this sense, puritanism presupposes a fundamentally authoritarian pattern of relationships within the world and reinforces that pattern. Thus, one of the basic sets of meaning through which American society explains itself to itself and to the world is in terms of the quest for purity, achievement of separation from the taint of the world and its concerns.

There are important ramifications to this orientation within the world. For instance, puritanisms are necessarily associated with essentially bipolar frameworks for conceiving of the world: good versus bad, us versus them. The puritan American while tightly disciplined is prone to be uncritical of self and hypercritical of others—both of those within the broader society who are different and of those external to the society altogether. Further, as puritanism originates in and continues to be fueled by the dynamics of social dislocation and change, its outcome will occasion additional change because it is an orientation in which individuals and groups do not rest easily with the world as

As one major strand of meaning in American social life, the image of a purified society has deep influence. Of course, as a set of symbols it is complex. The general meaning has included a concern, often exaggerated, to achieve control over those aspects of life experienced as uncertain. This uncertainty threatens individuals directly. Further, it challenges them indirectly through erosion of group identities based upon perceived collective interests. The quest for purity has been carried on in both private and public realms; consumption of alcoholic beverages, attitudes toward religious customs and traditions (especially as they stand in tension with general practices),

they find it. Even relationships with other puritans may not be easy. Very simply, it is difficult for the puritan to live in the world.

As the commitment to a pure social order, puritanism has been one framework of national meaning, both subject to a variety of constructions and constitutive of the culture as a whole. No less has the idea of the millennium represented another strand in the rope of religious meaning in American society. Recent scholarship has manifested essentially two kinds of interest in millenarian developments in the setting of basically preliterate and traditional cultures. In such contexts, heightened anticipation of a period of perfection for the society has often been a response to natural disaster or asymmetrical and threatening relationships with a powerful or imperialistic society.¹¹ Historians, on the other hand, have had their interests kindled in particular millenarian movements, especially in Western societies. These movements have often been interpreted as the form taken by protest against the changing social order.¹² The symbols adopted for the social protest have usually been derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition in which the images of the anticipated end-state in history include the expectation of relief for the oppressed and achievement of justice for the persecuted. The term millennium refers to a belief that there will be a return of the Christ figure to preside over the hitherto persecuted elect for a penultimate period. Following the millennium the last judgement will take place and all things be consummated at the end of history. This powerful imagery serves to vest the outcome of history in the hands of the group suffering in one or another manner in the present.¹³ In strict usage the term "millenarianism" refers to this complex of associated elements central to the tradition of Western religion. The term also denotes less

fully elaborated interpretations of the historical process. For example, it is widely held that there will be general prosperity for the dispossessed and a rectification of previously suffered injustices in the coming of the millennium. When religious images function as social symbols in popular culture, they do not necessarily conform to the technical distinctions so important in more strictly theological usage.

What has been common to the millenarianism of preliterate cultures and to the social movements in Western history is the anticipation of better times in a determinate future—that is to say, in a period within the historical process, not beyond it, and believed to be near at hand. In the perspective of social psychology, millenarian beliefs have provided meaning for threatened cultures seeking to survive periods of great stress.¹⁴

A fundamental characteristic of modern America has been rapid, virtually perpetual, social change. Therefore, it is not surprising that, in the absence of a traditional class structure, millenarian movements should have developed from time to time in American social history.¹⁵ Of course, particular episodes of millenarianism have been chronicled from the seventeenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. What is more interesting in the setting of the present discussion, however, is the place of generalized and durable millenarian social meanings. These latter appear to have served as significant frameworks of intelligibility within popular culture over relatively extended periods of time in American history. For example, scholarly attention has recently been drawn to the millenarian components which became influential with the Great Awakening (1740s) and continued through the late colonial and persisted into the early national periods. In studies of the phenomenon, it has been repeatedly sug-

gested that such components played a critical role in the social preparation for the founding of the new nation in the latter decades of the eighteenth century. One author has pushed this thesis to the point of proposing that democratic Jacksonianism of the nineteenth century, virtually 100 years removed from the First Awakening in time, is properly interpreted as the secularized result of the millenarianism of the preceding period. Both movements envisioned polities more responsive to the claims of the people.¹⁶

The crusading impulse in American society, which has been prone repeatedly to identify one *final* evil to be eradicated or one *last* wrong to be righted, also embodies millenarian elements. The pattern originated in evangelical circles of the early nineteenth century in specific social reform movements. By the twentieth century, however, the form of the crusading appeal was deeply suffused through American political life. So the nation could have its entry into a world war plausibly explained as a "war to make the world safe for democracy." Equally plausible was the subsequent crusade against a great alternative world order, atheistic communism.¹⁷

The basic issue in this analysis is not whether any particular commitment be just or inherently good—whether the stand against a fundamental moral evil like slavery on the one hand is comparable in moral terms to that against a rather inevitable social convention like "demon rum" on the other. The point is that a particular pattern of religious meaning has penetrated American culture so as to shape decisively its basic style. So a resolution is repeatedly believed to be at hand to that one special evil which, when overcome, will permit a long-anticipated and presumably static era to be ushered in. It seems to be suggested that when the era is achieved, no

more change will be necessary. Thus a deep sense of millenarian expectancy, admittedly with different specific contents, has suffused the American venture for more than three centuries. This pattern has a certain poignancy in a society so blessed with space, isolation (lack of immediate social threats), material resources beyond belief, and human talent. For all that America has nonetheless seemed to experience acutely a fear of failure. Thus in its uncertainty about internal coherence there has been frequent, even systematic, recourse to the myth of the better future, soon, in which the contradictions and threats of the present will be overcome.

One of the classic interpretations of American religious history is H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Kingdom of God in America*.¹⁸ At one level, it is an exposition of the different interpretations placed upon the symbol of the Kingdom of God from colonial times to the early twentieth century. Niebuhr thought that generally there had been a pronounced movement from an emphasis upon the sovereignty of God over human affairs to an emphasis upon a Kingdom of Christ as normative for social relationships. This latter construction of the symbol was most explicitly undertaken in the Social Gospel movement in American Protestantism at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁹ At another level, however, the study is the exploration of how the millenarian symbol of the Kingdom of God ties together much of American intellectual and social experience. More recently, a somewhat different approach to that theme has been offered in Ernest L. Tuveson's essay, *Redeemer Nation*, in which explicit attention is given to the national content of the millenarian symbol.²⁰ In whatever ways the symbol undergoes transformations in different periods and at different hands, its fundamental meaning is the attribution to the American nation of both

external and internal redemptive roles in world history. In this sense millenarianism has been a root symbol of American life in the same way that puritanism has been. Of course, each of these basic religious meanings of American life has a number of facets and appears sometimes unexpectedly, in one avatar after another.

Although puritanism as a fundamental meaning of American culture may be traced to Protestant beginnings, it has become a generic characteristic of the society. In the same way, although millenarianism was predominantly associated with Protestantism at the outset, it has been transformed so as to pervade the whole—and most of the parts as well. Mormons of the 1850s and 1950s, Roman Catholic radicals of the 1880s and 1960s, followers of John Humphrey Noyes in the 1840s and of Sun Myung Moon in the 1970s all manifest the degree to which millenarianism as a style of cultural life is thoroughly distributed through the society and gives form to a complex set of meanings of American culture.

At the center of American millenarianism is an outrageous conviction that this society is but one step from a perfect order—or at least one step from a set of conditions under which stasis will be achieved. Thus, the millenarian component of social meaning is extremely dynamic, oriented to effect change, and insistent that change take place. Yet it simultaneously holds forth the assumption that the new era, the great society, the promised epoch will bring completion to the process. It is a compulsive framework, but also one which fosters internal divisions. The believer is oriented to act in ways thought to be contingent but necessary. Finally an outcome discontinuous with the present form of experience is promised. In sum, the framework of meaning is one in which the process of realizing a goal contradicts the

content of that goal. It is a cultural version of the classical means-ends dilemma.

The religious meaning of American life is additionally complex because the millenarian symbol set exists not only in relationship to the puritanism already noted, but also in relationship to several other root meanings as well. The relationships between these meanings are not simple. To give an example, while in certain constructions the quest for purity can be imagined to be the content of the millennium, it is also possible for puritanism to value negatively the social commitments which symbolize the millenarian goal. Thus while there may be no place for race within the millennium, puritanisms may use race as an operative category of classification. Similar patterns of coincidence and conflict between the symbols exist with respect to additional basic meanings. These patterns make possible fundamental dissonance about the meaning of the society for members of different sub-cultures or different generations.²¹ This potential for conflict and stress within the framework of social intelligibility will be more evident after we elaborate several other basic or root constructs of meaning within American culture.

Another location of religious meaning in American social life has been in the receptivity toward those who have fled other social orders and political regimes. America has been a new homeland for various kinds of groups, including refugees driven from homelands by war, oppression, famine, and social control. America's receptivity has been an internally complex symbol, however, weaving together a tapestry from very different strands and creating a pattern not at all as simple as it might at first appear.

From colonial days to the present, the welcome extended to any who have sought to enter the society has usually

been genuine, if occasionally grudging, and frequently based on perceived self-interest. For example, Massachusetts Bay did not hang Quakers after the 1660s. But this toleration was not because the colony had developed a policy of actively welcoming them! Rather, the costs, both internal and external (repression at home and political conflict with England), of maintaining a policy of excluding the troublesome Quakers in order to preserve and maintain a rigorous religious establishment were perceived as too great to bear. In the simplest sense the open door policy can be understood in terms of benefits accruing to American interests: the crudest expression entailed the importation of cheap labor as a commodity, allowing no relationship between the exploited and existing communities in the society. There has unquestionably been a procession of small and large groups entering American life essentially to provide the human resources to make possible relentless economic growth. The role began with slaves from Africa and indentured servants from England, then swelled to include large groups of central and eastern Europeans, small contingents of orientals, and, more recently, Spanish-speaking groups and Southeast Asian refugees. In this respect the receptivity of the new homeland has been little more than potential for exploitation by American self-interest.

In terms of cultural self-understanding, however, one may see a more positive aspect to American toleration for immigrant groups. In this broader construction, the meaning has centered less on toleration (which at best thinly veils contempt) and more on a significant openness to others. This more positive perspective has also been present from the outset of American culture as, for instance, a genuine welcoming of certain peoples—a fine example being the experience of Jews in the American

colonial society. These wanderers across the globe seemed to offer a direct contact with the Bible, which was so influential in the Puritan self-understanding. Although it certainly produced strains and conflicts, the ethnic mixture of the middle colonies also represented a readiness on the part of the Dutch, the Germans, the Scotch-Irish, the English, the Swedes, and an assortment of other individuals and groups to co-exist and possibly to intermingle with others. This receptivity continued to be a part of American self-understanding through the subsequent centuries, leading to such notable episodes as the shelter provided the generation of European intellectuals which fled fascist persecution.²² In this broader sense, the operative ideal of the society has been a cosmopolitanism.

A third and rather more mythic aspect of this perspective can be identified: the highly idealistic vision or construction of American society which occasions the transformation of those who enter it into a "new humanity." The image was expressed in literary form in the well-known question of Crèvecoeur's as he reflected about the new republic: What is the American, this new man?²³ It can probably be traced back to sixteenth and seventeenth century speculations about the new-found continent and transformative powers associated with it. Assumptions about the generative and regenerative powers of American social life nourish this mythic construction. Fullest expression is given to it in Emma Lazarus' sentimental phrases, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."²⁴ In strictly imagistic terms, this idea is represented by the melting pot. It has been variously conceived. At one extreme it appealed to Henry Ford in a literal sense, while for sociologically inclined students of American society it has been an analytical model.²⁵

This latter mythic element, which highlights America's regenerative capability, represents powerful currents in American life. Typically, America's receptivity was most strongly expressed by those who viewed this society as the land of promise or among those who dramatically "made it," often overcoming what seemed to be insurmountable odds. A poignant portrayal of this meaning has been given in the fine film, "The Emigrants," which touchingly portrays the common people's excitement at the prospect of moving from the old homeland to the "land of promise." That vast numbers of emigrants should have left European lands at the height of the period of modern nationalism indicates the depth with which this idea of America as a new homeland penetrated the consciousness of common people in Europe.²⁶ It does not matter that this symbol—America's accessibility as a land of promise—was merchandised by salesmen. (From this point of view, Mormon missionaries and entrepreneurs of shipping lines performed much the same function.) The depth of resonance—the important point—is clear.

"America as the home for the homeless," "America opening arms for masses yearning to be free"—these sentiments seem of questionable validity in the later years of the twentieth century and may seem empty in our time. But in the interpretation of American culture the significance of this complex of images runs deep and must be part of any analysis giving serious attention to the religious set of meanings which has defined American experience. The symbol of receptivity comes to us out of the past. It may be tarnished in the present and clearly has a diminished currency. Thus, there is a temptation to overlook it. To assume that this perspective has lost its power is hazardous, however, since in the shifting kaleidoscope of American social life old elements reappear in new patterns. The image of America's being open to the world's

oppressed, for example, played relatively little role in making intelligible the society's participation in the World War II. After the war, however, it became a controlling symbol and contributed to the rather extraordinary dedication of resources to the rebuilding of Europe and the extension of assistance to newer nations. In analyzing the meaning of America's receptivity, we must certainly recognize how idealistic aspects have been continuous with those proceeding from the crassest self-interest. Currently this strand of religious meaning is not ascendant within the constellation of social commitments. But it does remain in the fabric of the received American culture, and its importance in the past must not be underestimated.

A fourth constituent symbol with pronounced religious content comes out of American social experience and is fundamental to its culture. This is the assumption that the society represents opportunity to its members, especially as individuals. This complex meaning is composed of many separate elements. One such thread is the ideal of political liberty, which is spun out in the eighteenth century as prelude to the struggle for independence. (Of course genetically it can be traced back into English Whig thought).²⁷ Economic enterprise and the protection of entrepreneurialism is also elaborated in both individual and collective versions, especially in the years following the Civil War.²⁸ Another element is the possibility of social liberty which develops rather later as the collective implications of particular natural rights are explored. Thus America as the land of opportunity is a construction that serves to legitimate widely varying patterns of individual initiative while supporting the tradition of limited government. In the extreme it works to circumscribe the elementary powers of government to regulate, investigate, or prohibit for the good of the whole society.

At least since de Tocqueville's analysis was offered,

students of American culture have identified liberty as a central, perhaps *the* central social symbol characteristic of American culture. But few students have been as successful as de Tocqueville in charting the ways in which the idea of liberty has set the style of individual life in the society, as well as the ramifications of the commitment to it in virtually all aspects of collective life. The individualistic component is so obvious and taken for granted that numerous commentators propose it as the primary root meaning of American life. This interpretation is all the more compelling in a framework of analysis which emphasizes individual self-consciousness to the exclusion of collective or corporate aspects of the question. But the basic goal in the present study is delineation of collective or corporate religious aspects of American society. From this point of view, individualism and individual liberty is a partial if not a false consciousness which must be explored in relation to social reality. Whatever content there is to individual liberty, social or collective forces provide the context or setting. It is in this sense that individual liberty as a social symbol must be interpreted against the reality of American society. We can illustrate how in its religious meaning liberty assumes particular shape.

In terms of social symbols our semi-mythic cultural heroes, from Daniel Boone to Howard Hughes, are perceived as rugged individualists suitable for emulation. Further reflection will suggest that this perception is based on systematically veiling how individuals relate to the social constraints we know to be mundane reality. For example, we now know that Howard Hughes had no existence apart from the shadowy Summa Corporation whose literal prisoner he was. In a similar way, other symbols of individualism mask from us the collective dimensions or social dependencies of our culture. Of course

in any case the true individuality, of which Erich Fromm wrote, is probably too great a burden for most humans to shoulder.²⁹ (This society has escaped, through accidents and good fortune, the fascist or collectivist outcomes of disillusionment which European lands experienced in the 1930s.) But the interesting point is how in the American setting various strategies have been created in the society to make it seem as if the myth represents reality. One strategy is that the ideal of individual opportunity is set in the context of other basic meanings (such as those discussed above), which work to *modify* its more extreme interpretations. As an example, individualism is modified through linkage to social ideals, like the notion of the millennium. Thus, the individualism tends to be muted by cultural context; the exploitative baron is celebrated for his philanthropy, the industrial tycoon by his service to the republic. There is, however, one consistent and important implication to this modification of the ideal of individualism: a deep tendency to perceive American life as fulfilled in plenty or abundance.³⁰ American culture has very little spiritual asceticism, even though in cross-cultural perspectives that is one classical means of exercising individual liberty.

These four basic meanings are embodied in and expressed through American culture. In different combinations they are part of our ordinary experiences in the media or our personal lives. These sets of symbols enable us to interpret our experience to ourselves. The four are not proposed as if they *exhausted* the set or the cluster of operative frameworks which might be identified as basic meanings of American social life. It would certainly be possible to sort out these strands in different ways. Additional clusters of ideas could be explored in great detail. These four particular rubrics have been selected because each has received

attention through the years in scholarly writing about the American character. Each is also conventionally taken for granted in current journalistic analysis. They are basic to American self-understanding, as it is presented in popular culture. They are recognizable, and it is self-evident that even if as a matter of critical judgment they are false values, they have been important in the life of the society. They have provided a kind of meaning which is properly considered religious because they have established horizons of collective self-understanding and provided enduring motivations for individual and group life.

This approach to the understanding of religious meaning within American culture has been adopted to establish a rather important theoretical point. Discussions of religious aspects of the society have generally resolved into proposals that *a particular meaning* is at the center of the American life. For Sidney Mead, who has made numerous contributions to this discussion, the meaning of American life is located in a "Religion of the Republic," identified as a particular religious tradition shaped by the Enlightenment. In his interpretation this cultural event is thought to have been a philosophical revolution. As a result of it, human life in both narrower individualistic and more extensive national, global, and cosmic frameworks may now be interpreted in highly rational terms. By contrast, for Robert Bellah the meaning of the American Civil Religion is to bring the United States to recognize the crucial role it must play at a juncture of human history as the twentieth century closes. To avoid catastrophe and destruction, national particularism must be replaced by a universalism, and national self-interest must be transformed into global self-consciousness. Additional proposals about the religious meaning of American society have been as selective

and, in most cases, as focused upon a single expectation or goal.

The discussion in this chapter has suggested that if it cannot be established that there is a particular closed set of beliefs at the center of a manifest religion of the society, it may be proposed that there is, nonetheless, an open set or cluster of meanings central to American culture. The particular symbols in this set are numerous, to some extent they are diffuse, and certainly they repeatedly undergo transformations. But the overall set is identifiably American, and the Americanness lies in the constellation more than in the separate elements.³¹ The constituent meanings are not exclusively associated with American culture, but the overall set of meanings probably is. Furthermore, this kind of approach to the religious understanding of American culture makes it possible to deal with the empirical observation that there are sub-cultures, or particular combinations of the meanings. A sub-set has intense reality for a particular segment of the society, while other sub-sets have significance for other groups. If the religious meaning of the American society is not single, it may nonetheless be interpreted as pluriform within the culture and specific to it. This is to propose that American social life in its religious aspect must be conceived as manifold. Certainly it is as pluriform as the culture. It is probably more internally complex in its religious aspect than in its political, and definitely more pluriform than in its economic aspect. The religious perspective must be included as basic to understanding the unities as well as the diversities of the culture, and requires at least as much attention and competent analysis as the other perspectives more frequently discussed.