

The Religious Origins of the American Dream

"You can understand neither America's past nor its present without comprehending the religious origins of the dreams that have animated our spirit." You might think such a statement could be made about many countries, that America is not unique in this respect. It is true that religion has played a role in the governments and the lives of many peoples. However, America is unique in the extent to which religious goals motivated her founding and formed her early spirit. You may say, as many have that, even if once that were true, like most modern nations America today is more than secular. But the vestiges of religion are still around us all as Americans, and these residual forces affect or confuse us precisely because their religious origin is often forgotten. The drive of religion has been submerged into our national unconscious.

Of course, we must begin by confessing that "the American dream" has meant many things, not one, and has varied from age to age. We also have to admit that, precisely because we have no state religion, we have always differed over religion and have been pluralistic rather than singular in articulating our religious goals. Still, given this plurality and heterodoxy, the surprising fact is that we have agreed as much as we have on religious goals and that religion's total effect has been as decisive as it has on American national life. In past ages, it was assumed that religion would fail unless it could be kept uniform and singular. In America its effectiveness has come from its ever-increasing plurality.

We need to undertake a national religious psychoanalysis today. That is, we must reconstruct a now forgotten but still significant past experience. As we do this we must admit that, in the beginning, no ideal or dream was or could have been thought of as peculiarly "American." When the religious pilgrims first arrived in a new land to live out the ideal life which Europe had frustrated, America was just a setting not a country. No national experience was present. In fact, 300 years later, it is hard to remember that no one who first landed here ever thought of forming an independent nation. Each colony expected political oversight to remain with England or Europe. Their dreams were European dreams. Only the place to act them out was new.

In strict terms, the earliest dream projected for the religious refugees was simply the age-old one of establishing the pure Christian life. This

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had everything to do with the Bible, the Reformation, and the history of Christianity and very little to do with the land along the Atlantic coast now called America. Of course, it was an unspoiled wilderness and thus would not thwart the attempts of the religious pilgrims as Europe had. 'America' meant nothing more than escaping English and European established powers.

Certainly not all who came to America were religiously motivated. In fact, the religious groups who figure so prominently in our vision of the founding of America were not the first to arrive on the new world's soil. Columbus had no particular religious motivation, and the commercial traders who came first brought little worship with them. Religious groups would never have come if secular interests had not already discovered and opened the new land. These original secular motives stayed on and flourished. Yet the interesting fact is how much of the eventual American dream takes its roots from those who fled religious persecution and sought a new place to achieve an ancient Christian dream.

What, then, were the earliest pilgrim dreams? How did these combine to form a national ambition? How have those visions changed? What is left of these early intentions after their religious origins have largely been forgotten? And how do these now-forgotten dreams disturb us still?

First of all, we must admit that the earliest dream, that of living out a fully Christian life and establishing a model social order as an inspiration for others, must be understood in the context of English/European Christianity as it existed at the time of the settling of America. This means post-Reformation, largely Protestant, notions of the Christian life. Although religious reform movements often begin by calling for a return to earlier primitive practices, in point of fact all reforms also reflect the cultural setting of their day. Of course, what is important is that America was settled in a time of social utopias, so that the Christian ideal was no longer monastic. The religious life now meant: A way in which ideal societies and communities could be built and the world transformed by imitating their life. The Pomona College motto is: "Our tribute to Christian Civilization".

The dreams of the pilgrim communities as they sailed for the new wilderness were not quite the unadulterated words of Jesus. Rather, they were those teachings blended with the humanistic consciousness that new civilizations could be constructed on a religious model. For most, this goal did not involve any idea of religious tolerance or pluralism of belief—those qualities we now like to associate with the American religious scene. On the contrary, such ideal communities could only be constructed on the basis of singularity and strictness of doctrine and practice. Nor were there any notions of separation of church and state. The new society could not be built unless religion controlled the political and economic structures of the ideal community. Although this was the leading view, of course, dissenters were present from the beginning too, e.g., Roger Williams and William Penn.

England and Europe had interfered with these plans, and so the religious groups had to look for unencumbered space where they could con-

control their autonomy. However, if we study the history of these transplanted religious groups as they developed, we know that none of them actually realized their dream of perfection. Like the history of the development of Christian ideals after the Reformation, the account of the successes and failures of the religious groups on the Atlantic shores is a book unto itself. Plagued by defection and schism and lethargy, they still at times reached great heights of vitality. But the important point is that the vision of establishing the perfect Christian community on these shores continually reappeared after each failure, so deeply implanted was it in our soil. Today these forces live on in our collective unconscious and disturb our ease with their call to live out an ideal.

The early goal to form a pure religious community became linked to the secular notion of "the progress of civilization." Thus, many religious groups simply transferred their hopes from religion to civilization's progress without really checking this against original biblical notions. On the other hand, secular Americans celebrated the advances of civilization without being conscious of how much religious inspiration and zeal had animated this goal to build a new society. From model Christian communities, independent and rigid in their orthodoxy, to the vision of a fully Christian civilization in America, on to hopes for the "progress" of culture—this was the pattern.

The union of states which emerged after the revolution against England was forced to establish religious tolerance and to disestablish any religion as official. But this often-celebrated action has also confused and haunted American dreams. For what once was to be accomplished in new, pure communities by law and strict state control had to be done by voluntary means—something no original pilgrim would have imagined possible. Furthermore, toleration of all religions and the resulting proliferation of religious groups would have pleased few pilgrims. On their view such tolerance would make it impossible for religious peoples to voice a common goal with any unity. Under the surface of our acceptance of separation of church and state still lurks the earlier and never-forgotten zeal to establish on this land a model community along religious lines.

This helps to explain our hostile response to every new religious group, since they pose a threat to our half-forgotten goal.

Voluntary churches and the denial of the rights of magistrates to deal with religious affairs became our pattern, but this exacted and still exacts its toll and sets up unconscious tensions in the American psyche. We know that only rigor and strictness can accomplish reform, and yet we love the ease of our newfound tolerance. Since dissenters in religion arose in America early on, pluralism of religion quickly became a matter of fact. The Enlightenment in Western cultural and its accompanying "rationalism" threatened established religion, too. In reaction, mass revivalism with its emotionalism and stress on intense piety broke out in the eighteenth century. These great religious awakenings became the American pattern of response to crisis.

The original American dream was to establish secure new communi-

ties based on traditional theologies. However, the religious awakenings which continually broke out placed the emphasis on inner religious experience and individual transformation. This crucial shift created a split and a tension we still live with in trying to define our goals, both in religion and in society. We cannot surrender the earlier animating dream of building a new society. Yet in reaction to the frustration involved in rejecting the rigid conformism necessary to do this, we explode on the social and religious front with claims that our goals are individually oriented—which they were not “in the beginning”.

America began with transplanted millennial hopes. Then the evangelical waves of enthusiasm and conversion which periodically swept the country continually awakened the hope of the coming millennium and placed it on an individual level. The goal was the same: a Christian civilization. But now it would be realized by an individual response to an outpouring of the Holy Spirit rather than by formal communities bringing paradise to the wilderness. The wind had reversed itself, and confusion resulted. The early dream faded; a national religious establishment would not be possible. The Enlightenment brought religious freedom, and Americans became convinced that the realm of the spirit lay beyond the reach of government. Still, we began by expecting a religiously informed government to create a new society, and many still expect this from our President and Congress, even if the original religious impulse lies forgotten.

To support this effort, early settlers were imbued with the cycle of repentance and renewal. If things went wrong, the leaders both civil and religious could call for repentance, reform and renewal. They could count on a majority of the people to recognize that their public decline was a result of moral or religious apostasy. Thus, failure could be dealt with through revivalist techniques. And if repentance came, energy would pour forth once more, now not scorned but blessed by God. Even today one can see in America what amounts to a public confession of sin and a call for repentance, both public and private, long after the notion of a covenant with God to which our nation must remain faithful has been abandoned or forgotten.

Our public schools were seen as a means for moral and spiritual instruction, as were all of the colleges which the various churches founded. Public education had a conscious overtone of religious purpose, and we treated education with commensurate respect—until recently. When our schools are completely secularized, this creates confusion among those who still support education with vast sums on the unconscious assumption that our schools will form moral character and renew the civilization, which education will not necessarily do if thoroughly secularized. Two centuries of intense American missionary effort all over the globe can only be understood as part of the dream to use Christianity as a means to create a new and ideal civilization world wide. If we lose our millennial hopes, the old cultures of the natives appear preferable (as many argue today), because we have lost the vision of the new ideal society the missionizing effort was to usher in.

Today America faces a decline in its spirit of voluntary support of organizations aimed at civic improvement. No one seems to understand why, because we forget that this tendency to form voluntary groups to accomplish reform is closely tied to the early Protestant hopes to build an ideal society here. If our religious zeal is either lost or confused, the effort to tackle enormous social problems by voluntary associations seems either silly or vain, as opposed to entrusting reform to government. Today, many reject reform by bureaucracy, but we end in no man's land, because we cannot quite go back to our earlier religiously animated zeal either.

"Perfect religious liberty does not imply that the government of the country is not a Christian government," said Bela Bates Edwards.¹ On a conscious level, a majority of Americans would reject such a statement now. But if they would consult their unconscious hopes for what they expect their government to achieve and live up to, even secular Americans will find themselves still full of religious idealism. Other governments are corrupt and their people accept this as the way of politicians. But Watergate creates psychic turmoil and near panic in the American soul. Americans still expect their political representatives to set the kind of moral standards necessary if official government is to be the instrument to realize our national dreams.

America's mainline religions react with hostility toward new sects, but this may be because most American religious groups began as sects themselves. They have not lost the sense of their own unstable beginnings, which makes them strike out at others who challenges them. Ernst Troeltsch says a sect is "a religious group which is gathered or called out of some organic or state church on positively anticonformist grounds, sometimes by a charismatic leader, but as often by a principle of greater strictness, more single-minded dedication, or more intense abnegation of the world and its attractions."² Americans, as opposed to European monastic orders, have tended to include the world rather than deny it. But 'sect' can never be used as a bad word in America, since so many of our religious and national dreams began with a dissenting sect. Rev. Sun Myung Moon says he has come from Korea to America to call us back to our original goals.

The connection between the religious Great Awakening in America and our revolution against British control is the subject for a long discourse. But it is clear that, as religious sentiment wanes, so does the American's sense of his or her spiritual heritage and our purpose for existence as a nation. Methodism became a quest for sanctification or holiness (sinlessness). This is completely consistent with the American religious ethos, and Methodism succeeded to a greater extent in America than in England. Now, when their driving energy to achieve moral

¹ As quoted by Handy, Robert, in *A Christian America*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1971, p. 56.

² As paraphrased by Ahlstrom, Sydney, in *A Religious History of the American People*. Yale University Press. New Haven, 1970, p. 230.

perfection lags, Methodists cannot find a reason for being separate and so think of themselves as like anyone else.

We Americans try every secular pleasure and are reputed to be good at enjoyment. However, I think that is false and often is asserted simply as a defense. We have too much conscience and too strong a sense of mission to settle into pleasure with the proper attitude of self-concern it requires. *Playboy* lifestyle is popular simply as a relief against strict conscience, not because we lack one. We are always thinking in terms of some grand scheme, all of which only makes us protest that we do—we really do—enjoy a life of pleasure. But our seriousness betrays us. As a nation we were born with a Puritan conscience, and it haunts us even when forgotten. We grew up as a people wanting to bring God's kingdom on earth, and it is hard to settle into luxury easily with that burden on our national soul. We are essentially "activists" and must be about something, preferably the Lord's business.

"The nation emerged as the primary agent of God's meaningful activity in history."³ Gloomy about America's future as we are today, we must be honest enough to admit that—for a time—this seemed to be true and much of the world treated America that way. Karl Marx was interested in "the American experiment", even though his bias made him miss its religious inspiration. Many fled to our shores seeking haven. Even if they came for economic benefit or political freedom from oppression, they often stayed on to be caught up in the vision of America's religious mission to build a great society.

Solzhenitsyn's main challenge to the West⁴ is that we have lost our courage. Much of that is true, but he fails to see the connection to our frustrated religious impulse. When we thought we were transforming the world along the lines of God's plan for an ideal civilization, we had all the courage and drive religious inspiration can provide. In a secular day, we have lost faith in the religious goal, and we do not even understand why this results in a loss of courage and flagging daily motivation. Our desire to have more things and a better life causes us only worry and depression. We do not see that our late material goals, divorced from their original religious connection, lose their meaning.

Solzhenitsyn touches the key to the whole dilemma when he says we in the West came to accept the humanistic concept "according to which there is no evil inherent in human nature" (p.23). That certainly was not true of the early Pilgrims, who knew that evil and God's judgment awaited them around every corner, and they trembled at the thought. But this became true as the American dream secularized, forgot its religious origins, and took over Enlightenment philosophies. Thus, the core problem today may be that evil has returned to the heart of human affairs, and the humanistic, optimistic outlook we came to substitute for Christianity does not know how to cope with this. Humanism cannot re-

³ Sidney Mead. *The Nation With the Soul of A Church*. Harper and Row, New York, 1975, p. 73.

⁴ "The Exhausted West", *Harvard Magazine*, July/August 1978, pp. 21-26.

pent without contradicting itself.

The Protestant concept of the independence of the individual which emerged from the Reformation gave us the courage to revolt against British kingly power.⁵ Today we need to reexamine how Protestant Christianity worked to form the early American dream. Our utopian thinking led us to think of America as beginning the emancipation of the world, just as the Marxist believes he is called to do. No wonder the two world visions clash, although the American version has become confused, both by forgetting its spiritual origins and by becoming as material and as much a matter of economics as Marxism. At the moment, avowed materialism in America appears stronger than a spiritual dream which has degenerated into a material craze.

In two books with John Roth,⁶ I first explored the forming of what came to be the distinctive features of American religious thought and practice. Next, from this base we tried to project an American theology for the coming age. America has, then, become distinctive enough in its religious outlook to use its own experience as the basis for a new theology. There is, of course, either much unhappiness or much confusion today over what is called "the American Dream." But surely a critical reappraisal of our national goals must involve becoming clear about the religious roots of this dream and our primal drive toward it. Of course, if our religious outlook has changed, the national goals must be reappraised accordingly.

This is not to assume that our nation's goals, either now or in the past, have been solely determined by their original religious impulse. Certainly in the recent years "the American Dream" has come to mean many things other than forming a religious utopian society, most often economic success. (In California a bumper sticker in support of the passage of the tax initiative, Proposition 13, read: "Save the American Dream.") But a critical appraisal of these recent forms of the American Dream, which many want either to deny or to change, requires us to bring back into our consciousness a knowledge of how these goals descended from the original religious impulse. The religious dream has faded or been rejected by many. But the power-drive toward a new society is so basic to our life as a people that this disoriented, surging energy disturbs our conscious and our unconscious national life.

⁵ See Page Smith, ed. *Religious Origins of the American Revolution*. Scholars Press, Missoula, Montana, 1976.

⁶ *The American Religious Experience*, Harper and Row, New York, 1972; and *God and America's Future*, Consortium Press, Wilmington, N.C. 1977.