

EMPIRE:
THE AMERICAN RELIGION

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The United States of America is different than any previous empire that has existed. It has been built upon a platform of religious freedom, prohibiting the government from forming an established religion in its Constitution. In the more than two centuries it has existed, the United States has continued to voice its opposition to state-governed religion, going as far as preventing any promotion of religious activities, including prayer in public schools. Despite this opposition to government-sponsored religion, the history and actions of the American government have been guided by fervor reminiscent of religion. Ever since European colonists set foot on the American continent, a new form of religion has evolved, incorporating all other religions and governments. It is the American religion and it exemplifies all that America represents. At first glance, the American religion may seem to faithfully hold to its own tenets of liberty, freedom, and democracy. When studied under a scrupulous eye, the American religion is no less than its own version of empire, with doctrines of religious validation, religious superiority, God's guidance, the call to proselytize Americanism, and God's promise of prosperity to the righteous. While encyclopedias could be written detailing the effects of the American religion on its imperial practices, such as expansion, free trade, isolation, containment, and national security, this paper will specifically show the origins of American imperialism and how it is entrenched in religious thought and these doctrines. Every one of these doctrines is based on the faith that the American people have in the supremacy of their "religion." It is a religion that declares that God upholds America over all nations of the earth, and that His word is found in America's "Holy Bible," known to its followers as the Constitution of the United States.

The American religion, similar to the American nation, has its roots deeply embedded in European culture. Before the discovery of the New World, Europeans had

already set out to build up their empires in the Atlantic. This included a civilizing mission to spread Christianity and enlightened European government, while benefiting economically. When the Spaniards discovered the Canary Islands off the northwestern coast of Africa in 1389, they described the natives, or Guanche, “as living in caves, wearing only skin and rush clothing, illiterate, [and] without coherent government or civic institutions.”¹ The Spanish sent fleets in the following decades to conquer the islands, enslave the people, and pursue their economic interests, specifically sugarcane production. Nearly a century later, when Columbus discovered the island of Hispaniola in 1492, he described its natives similarly to the Guanche, noting specifically that their “skin is the color of the Canary Islanders.”² Upon his return to Spain, Columbus was sent back with a mission. Under Queen Isabella, the Spaniards began to send expeditions to enlarge the empire, hoping to gain a monopoly on the New World. Spanish imperialism was not only guided by economics, but also by Isabella’s close connection to the Catholic Church, as she adhered to the advice of the pope to send “with Columbus on his second voyage the first group of what would ultimately become thousands of priests.”³ It is here where the new American imperialism took root, not amongst Protestants or Puritans fleeing persecution, but from Spain’s attempts to gain religious validation. As the natives in the New World were seen as inferior, “only by trying to save their souls, the Spaniards believed, did [Spain] acquire the right to exploit the natives.”⁴ The conquistadors and the Catholic priests were united in their justifying of empire, imperially setting up governmental and religious institutions they saw as being superior.

¹ William R. Polk, *The Birth of America: From Before Columbus to the Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 43.

² *Ibid.*, 43.

³ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

When the colonists in America set up their own institutions, they also sought religious validation in the forming of their government. The *Declaration of Independence* was more than a mere assertion of the people's right to govern according to "the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them."⁵ Religious validation was a part of the American "religion," and so, as the representatives gathered to declare their independence, they asserted their rights while "appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions."⁶ This rectitude was the same validation sought by those who had first colonized the land, and it continued to be a principle of the American religion a decade later when a new form of government was introduced. Before *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of many, One) was decided upon as the national motto upon the Seal of the United States, William Barton introduced alternatives. He "put forth a selection of patriotic and weighty Latin mottos for the United States of America, preferring *Virtus sola invicta* (Only virtue unconquered), *Deo favente* (With God's favor), *In vindiciam libertatis* (In defense of liberty), and *Perennis* (Enduring through the years)."⁷ Every one of these Latin phrases could be considered as verses in the scriptures of the American religion, and the verse of acting with God's favor correlates directly to the American doctrine of religious validation.

When the canon of scriptures was completed, the Constitution of the United States was like the Book of Revelation, completing the codex of the American religion and asserting religious validation. Since the word God is nowhere found in the Constitution, nor

⁵ Thomas Jefferson, "The Declaration of Independence," in *The American Intellectual Tradition, Volume I: 1630-1865*, eds. David A. Hollinger & Charles Capper (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 132.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁷ Neil Baldwin, *The American Revelation: Ten Ideals that Shaped Our Country From the Puritans to the Cold War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 56.

any word referring to Him, it is difficult to find religious validation in the document itself. The First Amendment makes it clear why this is, for they wanted to prevent the writing of any “law respecting an establishment of religion.”⁸ The man attributed as one of the principle writers of the Constitution, James Madison, wrote in his famous *Memorial and Remonstrance* just two years earlier the reasons why religion needed to be left to the “reason and conviction” of the individual.⁹ Despite his insistence on religious neutrality, Madison ended this document with “earnestly praying, as we are in duty bound, that the Supreme Lawgiver of the Universe, by illuminating those to whom it is addressed, may on the one hand, turn their Councils from every act which would affront his holy prerogative, [...] and on the other, guide them into every measure [...] and may establish more firmly the liberties, the prosperity and the happiness of the Commonwealth.”¹⁰ Madison believed in the American religion’s doctrine of religious validation, seeking through prayer God’s “holy prerogative.”¹¹ He further upheld the doctrines of God’s guidance and promise of prosperity to the righteous.

Madison’s insistence on the holy prerogative of God also shows his attempt to ensure that the American Empire be formed under divine, or morally superior, principles. In arguing for the Constitution, Madison believed “it may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government.”¹² In his famous *Federalist Paper Number 51*, Madison continued to show his belief in the superiority of

⁸ “The Constitution of the United States of America,” in *American Legal History: Cases and Materials*, 3rd ed., eds. Kermit L. Hall, Paul Finkelman & James W. Ely, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 685.

⁹ James Madison, “To the Honorable the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia A Memorial and Remonstrance,” 2006. *The Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs, Ashland University*. <http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=144> (1 June 2007).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² James Madison, “The Federalist, Number 51,” in Hollinger & Capper, 159.

God's governance. "If men were angels," he argued, "no government would be necessary."¹³ Madison sought a government that was limited and checked by an external force. Besides the power of the people, the Constitution was to be that external force, and thus it became the "supreme Law of the Land."¹⁴ The Constitution was Madison's concurrence of the doctrine of religious superiority, and as the supreme law, it became American scripture. Madison did not invent this idea of a supreme law, but, much like all other American doctrines, he inherited it from those Europeans who preceded him in colonizing the New World.

The Spaniards attempted to exclude all others from colonizing the Americas, placing the Catholic Church as supreme, but the New World quickly decided upon the superiority of its new American religion. Under Spanish rule, "migrants were screened, not for criminal activity, [...] but for religious conviction. Muslims, Jews, and later of course Protestants were excluded."¹⁵ By the 17th Century, Protestants were colonizing the New World, and the tenets of liberty, freedom, and democracy were already being promoted, while the doctrines of empire were carefully practiced. Puritans began colonizing the North American continent, and in 1630, John Winthrop proclaimed his own supreme law of the land, saying, "there are two rules whereby we are to walk one towards another: Justice and Mercy."¹⁶ Though he did not use the specific words liberty, freedom, and democracy, these tenets of faith were simply spoken in the language of his day. Justice and mercy were to be guided by love, Winthrop claiming that "this love is a divine spiritual nature; free, active, strong, courageous, permanent, under valuing all things beneath its proper object, and of all the

¹³ Ibid., 159.

¹⁴ "The Constitution of the United States of America," 683.

¹⁵ Polk, 45.

¹⁶ John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," in Hollinger & Capper, 7.

graces this makes us nearer to resemble the virtues of our heavenly father.”¹⁷ Winthrop’s *Model of Christian Charity* was no different than the Spanish Catholic idea that their institutions were of a superior nature. The American religion under the Constitution also declared the superiority of its institutions above all other forms of government and society.

The American religion was built on this idea of superiority, and throughout its history the United States has promoted its principles and institutions as having a global supremacy unlike any in history. In his 1796 farewell address, President George Washington gave counsel to the nation, with a prophecy of his own that “it will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and at no distant period a great nation to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence.”¹⁸ The American religion was exalted with a supremacy that demanded Americans be charitable by imperially sharing its freedoms and ideals with mankind. Sharing America’s justice and freedom has been the task of every president since Washington, though all have differed in their implementation of this doctrine. In 1821, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams reiterated America’s supremacy, saying, “America, with the same voice which spoke herself into existence as a nation, proclaimed to mankind the inextinguishable rights of human nature, and the only lawful foundations of government.”¹⁹ He then followed with his belief as to how the only lawful foundation of government could be shared with the world: “She will commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example.”²⁰ This

¹⁷ Ibid., 13.

¹⁸ George Washington, “President George Washington Cautions Against Factionalism and Permanent Alliances in His Farewell Address, 1796,” in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Volume 1: To 1920*, eds. Dennis Merrill & Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2005), 66.

¹⁹ John Quincy Adams, “Secretary of State John Quincy Adams Warns Against the Search for ‘Monsters to Destroy,’ 1821,” in Merrill & Paterson, 133.

²⁰ Ibid., 133.

implementation of the doctrine of sharing the American religion mirrors John Winthrop's Puritan vision of a "City upon a Hill, [while] the eyes of all people are upon us."²¹ Just as the Puritans thought they would spread their religion by their example, John Adams sought to extend the American religion through its example, as its supremacy over all other beliefs is made apparent.

Putting supremacy aside, no religion is without deity, and one of the most important tenets of the American religion is that God is at the helm of the American Empire. In 1765, before the American Revolution, John Adams explained how "the settlement of America [...] was 'the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth'."²² God was the one who settled America, and those that inhabited the land were part of His grand plan to enlighten the world. As Americans looked westward to expand their nation in the 19th Century, the author of Manifest Destiny, John L. O'Sullivan proclaimed, "We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can."²³ Just as God led the Israelites out of bondage and across the wilderness, Manifest Destiny proclaimed that God led the Americans against any boundaries as they marched across the American frontier. The doctrine of God's guidance led followers of the American religion to pursue expansion. By the end of the 19th Century, the boundaries of the United States extended from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and it appeared that the United States could grow no more, and the principle of expansion seemed complete.

²¹ Winthrop, 14.

²² Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 191.

²³ John L. O'Sullivan, "Democratic Publicist John L. O'Sullivan Proclaims America's Manifest Destiny, 1839," in Merrill & Paterson, 197.

Following the Spanish-American War, the President at the time, William McKinley provided the next answer as to how Americans could continue pursuing the doctrine of God's guidance. "I am not ashamed to tell you," McKinley said, "that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance."²⁴ He doesn't say how he received an answer, but he does say that the answer came, and "that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, 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."²⁵ President McKinley believed just as John Quincy Adams that the American religion was supreme, but he differed in that McKinley's plan to spread the American religion extended beyond a mere example. This difference in implementing the American religion by coercion was given religious validation through God's direct guidance to the President while he knelt in prayer. This revelation also shows that not only is it God at the head of the American religion, it has often been the Christian God.

With God as the head of the American Empire, all followers of the American religion are then called to proselytize Americanism. The Spanish-American War proved to show that the American God was more than simply Christian, but republican. He was republican in the sense of promoting governmental doctrines of "independence and republican freedoms" which the American people under President McKinley felt needed to be preached to those in Cuba and the Philippines.²⁶ McKinley was not the first to promote the missionary effort in proselytizing the American religion. The Declaration of Independence gave to people under despotic rule the right and "duty, to throw off such

²⁴ William McKinley, "McKinley Preaches His Imperial Gospel, 1899," in Merrill & Paterson, 336.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 336.

²⁶ Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 378.

Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.”²⁷ Not only did the Declaration provide for the right of the people under that rule to separate and form their own government, but it also taught, “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them.”²⁸ By declaring the causes that impelled action, religious validation could be sought, as well as the opportunity of proselytizing American opinions to mankind. A century later, McKinley’s ideas were merely “the product of a universalist ideology as articulated in the Declaration of Independence. It reflected Americans’ view of themselves, stretching back to before the nation’s founding, as the advance guard of civilization, leading the way against backward and barbaric nations and empires.”²⁹ It was all part of an American enlightenment, and just as historic religions have taught that God “will make darkness light,” the American religion sought to bring the light of its gospel, or good news, of republicanism to the rest of the world.³⁰

When Americans achieved their independence, they believed that they would bring the world out of darkness and that their enlightenment would enable liberty and imperialism to be joined like never before. Such was to be a different kind of imperialism, one based on a perfected form of missionary work. Their success would be seen through scientific achievement, promoting principles of freedom, and politically “driving back the forces of tyranny and in the creating of new free governments.”³¹ Their job was to proselyte and teach the doctrines, not of Christianity, but of republicanism, which to Americans meant much more than just politics. The American enlightenment fostered a new sense of civility in a person, and that enabled American imperialists to share their truths by way of

²⁷ Jefferson, 132.

²⁸ Ibid., 132.

²⁹ Kagan, 416.

³⁰ Isaiah 42:16, King James Version, Holy Bible.

³¹ Wood, 191.

proselytizing rather than conquering. Just as civility developed in the European enlightenment in showing how a person's "politeness, good manners, and elegance remained the defining characteristics [...] in opposition to the rudeness and barbarism of the Gothic past," so did the American enlightenment foster the changing views of how a gentleman should act, which "now took on a moral as well as a social meaning, and in this sense gentility became republicanized."³² Alexis de Tocqueville understood the significance of morality in the American religion when he argued that Americans "must know that liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith."³³ It was the faith of Americans in the moral superiority of their way of life that enabled them to justify the spread of liberty by imperial means.

When Thomas Jefferson envisioned an empire of liberty, he understood how these principles of enlightened gentility and civilization could perfect imperialism, enabling it to succeed without coercive force. Since the empire would be based on liberty, rather than force or power, "it would be strong because it had the confidence of a virtuous citizenry, because in such a government every man 'would fly to the standard of the law, and would meet invasions of the public order as his own personal concern'."³⁴ When de Tocqueville visited the United States a few decades after Jefferson's presidency, he observed that followers of the American religion, both citizens and leaders, consistently advocated virtue. In discussing public officers, de Tocqueville observed that "their authority [comes] only on condition of putting themselves on a level with the whole community by their manners. A public officer in the United States," he continued, "is uniformly simple in his manners,

³² Ibid., 194-195.

³³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 12.

³⁴ Robert W. Tucker & David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 21.

accessible to all the world, attentive to all requests, and obliging in his replies.”³⁵

Domestically, public officials displayed civility and manners that encouraged the people to delegate power and authority to them, obviating the need for coercion. Internationally, so long as the nation remained civil and well mannered in its imperialism, according to the tenets of the American religion, it could exert its power and influence in the world.

American missionaries are different than the missionaries of the past, carrying the writings of Paine, Hamilton, Jefferson and Madison, rather than the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The American religion disguises them with titles of agents, diplomats and ambassadors, rather than missionaries, apostles, elders or presbyters. One of the first American missionaries was Benjamin Franklin, who carried his own thoughts and writings as one of the leaders of the American enlightened religion. Like all other religious followers, Franklin pursued goals of moral perfection and even wrote as an early Christian apostle, adding to the canon of American scripture when he published *Poor Richard's Almanack*, one of the most widely purchased books of its time. It was a gospel of sayings as Franklin listed various verses of wisdom concluding with his thirteen virtues and a commandment to “let no pleasure tempt thee, no profit allure thee, no ambition corrupt thee, no example sway thee, no persuasion move thee, to do any thing which thou knowest to be evil.”³⁶ Though Franklin attempted to avoid religious affiliation in his writings, he was writing as a subscriber to the American religion, which rejected a specific denominational God while accepting doctrines of good versus evil. At first, Franklin was a diplomat in England on behalf of the colonies under the Crown, but Franklin was already converted to the American religion, and by 1775, “he had given up his long and patient faith that British

³⁵ de Tocqueville, 207.

³⁶ Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack* (Mount Vernon, NY: Peter Pauper Press, 1980), 77.

wisdom might be able to prevail over a reactionary king and his bought Parliament.”³⁷ It was wisdom and enlightenment that inspired this missionary, and by the end of his life as the French Revolution began to convulse, Franklin wrote these immortal words: “God grant that not only the love of liberty but a thorough knowledge of the rights of man may pervade all the nations of the earth, so that a philosopher may set his foot anywhere on its surface and say, This is my country.”³⁸ The goal of the American religion is to pervade all the nations of the earth with its doctrines containing this knowledge and love of liberty.

Along with proclaiming its tenets to the world, the American religion inherited its doctrine of prosperity to the righteous from its imperial forebears. When the Romans fought under the Christian banner of the Labarum, their victories were attributed to Constantine, who, “calling in prayer on God in heaven and on His Word, Jesus Christ Himself, the Saviour of all, to come to his aid, he advanced at the head of all his forces, intent on recovering for the Romans the liberty of their ancestors.”³⁹ Liberty remained the guiding force of imperialism for centuries to come. Under British imperialism, “it was also popularly believed that Protestantism had conferred other related blessings on the nation, notably those of progress and wealth.”⁴⁰ It was no different among the people on the American continent, for the Puritans believed that as long as they were obedient to their covenant with God, they would “live and be multiplied, and that the Lord [would] bless [them] in the land.”⁴¹ Winthrop concluded this sermon by reiterating that God “is our life,

³⁷ Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Viking Press, 1938), 698.

³⁸ Benjamin Franklin, quoted in Van Doren, 773.

³⁹ Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, translated by G.A. Williamson (New York: Barnes & Nobles, 1965), 368.

⁴⁰ David Alderson, *Mansex fine: Religion, Manliness and Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century British Culture* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1998), 11.

⁴¹ John Winthrop, 15.

and our prosperity.”⁴² Empires took on religions thinking that God would preserve and bless them, and just as the Puritans held to their doctrine of prosperity, the non-denominational American religion embraced the doctrine under its own imperial wing, preaching that economic prosperity would be awarded to the disciples of democracy, republicanism and liberalism.

As Americanism developed before and during the Revolutionary War, this idea evolved to include every form of prosperity. As the American religion incorporated God’s promise of prosperity in its belief system, “pre-Revolutionary Americans were convinced that their impending greatness would be measured not only in expansion and prosperity but also in cultural and scientific achievement.”⁴³ As one of the most prominent leaders in the American religion, Benjamin Franklin was one of the greatest achievers in science. His inventions ranged from bifocals to the lightning rod. He was an extraordinary man wherein “mind and will, talent and art, strength and ease, wit and grace met in him as if nature had been lavish and happy when he was shaped.”⁴⁴ Franklin, however, did not limit his view to science either, for looking westward in the 1750’s to the American frontier, he believed, “it would furnish opportunity for many ages of unchecked human increase and prosperity, [...] but Franklin had still no notion of American independence except for local rights and responsibilities within the frame of empire.”⁴⁵ By the end of his life, in his famous letter to Ezra Stiles, Franklin confessed the secret of his prosperity: “I shall only add, respecting myself, that, having experienced the goodness of that [Supreme] Being in conducting me

⁴² Ibid., 15.

⁴³ Kagan, 38.

⁴⁴ Van Doren, 782.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 217-218.

prosperously through a long life, I have no doubt of its continuance in the next.”⁴⁶ To his death he was true to the tenets of the American religion, attributing his prosperity to God.

Every succeeding preacher of the American religion has sustained this idea of the promised blessing of prosperity for the faithful followers of Americanism. By the time of the Revolutionary War when America separated from its mother country to engage in war, God’s promise of prosperity was immediately incorporated as an American doctrine, for all empires wish to have God on their side when battling their enemies. At the beginning of the war, Thomas Paine began writing his pamphlets entitled *The American Crisis*, and pointed to God’s hand in even the simplest of things. Believing that God was on their side, Paine argued that he even upheld General Washington, and “that God hath blest him with uninterrupted health, and given him a mind that can even flourish upon care.”⁴⁷ God’s blessing of prosperity, under the American system, was a promise to the individual, not just the empire. The individual in America had limitless opportunities and Americans sought those opportunities in the west, as far as the Oregon territory itself. When the rights to the land were debated, former President John Quincy Adams validated the American pursuit of prosperity, property, or happiness, showing it was their duty under the American religion. He stood before the House of Representatives and “asked the clerk to read into the record a passage from the ancient Second Psalm of David: ‘Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.’ These verses bore witness to the current American imperative. ‘Well, sir,’ Adams concluded, ‘our title to Oregon stands on the same foundation [...] to make the wilderness blossom as a rose’.”⁴⁸ The vast expanse of land to the west provided this promise of

⁴⁶ Benjamin Franklin, quoted in Van Doren, 777.

⁴⁷ Thomas Paine, “American Crisis I” in *Collected Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 94.

⁴⁸ Baldwin, 91.

prosperity to every individual seeking his manifest destiny, and this destiny was an American imperative.

Conclusion

This paper has not attempted to promote or denounce the American religion of empire, but rather to show how American imperialism is embedded in religious thought. The United States has certainly become a model of freedom, liberty, and democracy, unlike the world has ever seen. Winthrop labeled it as a model of Christian charity, and the United States has merely taken the “Christian” out and replaced it with imperial charity. America has enjoyed unprecedented prosperity, and in all of its imperial undertakings, has attempted to share its religion by acquiring a justification for empire, imperially setting up institutions Americans see as being superior, just as the Spanish Catholics attempted centuries earlier. Whether or not this is the true religion, or in other words, a religion for every people, is for the people of the world to decide. Americans can choose to continue their course as the clergy, while the rest of the world follows as the laity. Once converted, the world can choose to follow the American scriptures, adhering to the principles in the Constitution of the United States as principles “under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” Just as Constantine marched in victory under the Christian banner of the Labarum, Americans march under the banner of the American Flag. Imperialism is the vehicle driving these principles, for Americanism is similar to all religions and requires validation for its acts, along with a force of missionaries to spread the gospel, carrying the American canon of freedom, liberty and democracy to a dark world in need of enlightenment.

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