

introduction

MOST ANALYSTS ARE CONVINCED that 9/11 was a turning point in American history. Some have called it the beginning of a new century of terrorism and other forms of religiously motivated violence. Yet many American columnists and most foreign critics remain puzzled about the seeming new face of America that has emerged with increasing clarity in the past six years. At the center of the puzzle are the religious language President Bush has employed and the wide resonance it has evoked in the American public. If, as many social critics had believed, the “civil struggles” of the 1960s and ’70s had shattered the “religious basis” of the country and broken the “spiritual mold of a public religion,”¹ how can this resonance be explained?²

In his responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush often framed the conflict with Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda and the pursuit of peace in religious terms. “We’re fighting evil” or “the evil ones,” he pronounced on several occasions.³ Initially drawing upon the rhetoric of theological absolutes, Bush presided over so-called Operation Infinite Justice as a “crusade against terrorism.” In his remarks at the Washington National Cathedral service on September 14, he stood in the pulpit to announce a world-scale purgation of evil, stating that “our responsibility

to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.”⁴ To eliminate evil from the entire world is a millennial project. Where did this grandiose conception come from?

The scope of Bush’s crusade has expanded. In his State of the Union Address on January 29, 2002, the president identified the nations of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an “axis of evil” and renewed his commitment to purge from the world any states that grant terrorists “the means to match their hatred.” Despite the virtually boundless scope of this crusade, its purpose is benign, the president explained, because “we seek a just and peaceful world beyond the war on terror.”⁵ This purpose led to the Iraq War, which has provoked such opposition that even the most pro-Western publics in the Islamic world have exploded with rage and frustration, making terrorism more likely in the future. This raises the puzzles that this book attempts to answer: What has led the majority of religiously inclined Americans to affirm this counterproductive crusading mentality? Why has the American sense of mission taken this martial form?

We seek to answer these puzzles by an analysis of the American religious tradition. We shall show that there was a globally crusading element at the center of American Puritanism from the earliest settlements onward, and that it did not in any sense originate with Mr. Bush. The theocratic orientation was fully developed in New England, and our analysis will show that despite its deflation after the first generation, it was embodied in a new form of American nationalism after the War for Independence. The nation came to think that it had a millennial mission to advance the cause of freedom.⁶

We offer a critical perspective on this religious nationalism, showing its positive and negative sides throughout American history. The analysis clarifies the key role of a particular side of the Bible in motivating this crusading tendency. Just as one needs to understand the Qur’an to understand Islamic countries, the Bible is the document required to understand the American colonies and the nation that developed from them.⁷ It is also the most important source of the peculiar and powerful development of democratic ideas. It was the Bible that provided warrant for the democratic style of church organization advocated by early Congregationalists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, and these groups extended their advocacy into the realm of civil government, beginning in New England. The Bible provided the framework for political covenants, freely agreed upon by citizens, as the appropriate basis for government. The democratic ideas of individual freedom, equality, democratic social order, and

protection of conscience were all derived from early American readings of the Bible.⁸

We trace the development of this democratic ideology, explaining why it prevailed in the environment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which otherwise were dominated by autocratic social institutions. The most influential religious groups carried forward the motto of the European Reformation, *sola scriptura*, which means that the ultimate authority in the Christian religion is the Bible, which everyone can interpret for himself or herself. Since the Bible is a collection of writings with different points of view, it tends to encourage the development of argumentative cultures. For most of American history, the Bible has been the most important single influence, in a variety of directions, and we therefore devote more attention to this theme than other historians might.

We argue that some of the problems as well as the promise of American democracy were influenced by the same Bible: the brutal, crusading tradition as well as its opposite—respect for enemies and resolution of conflicts through democratic processes. This dialectic was developed in a book written soon after 9/11, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil*. This dialectic is directly related to an aspect of the current puzzle, the rise of Christian Fundamentalism and its influence on American behavior, including its uncritical support of Israel and of the war on terrorism. We shall explain the roots of this movement in the nineteenth century and its growth from a fringe phenomenon into a dominating force in the past twenty-five years. The remarkable story of setting the date for the Battle of Armageddon in the 1980s and again in 2000 accounts in large part for the emergence of Fundamentalism as a political force.

The publicly supported reaction against international law since 9/11 is also related to this crusading tendency of American religion. Foreign observers were puzzled about the widespread support for the Bush administration's efforts to prevent the establishment of the International Criminal Court. Despite earlier support and sponsorship of this and similar institutions, not only did the nation fail to ratify this treaty, but Congress actually passed legislation, with hardly a dissenting vote, authorizing the president to mount a military attack on The Hague in order to rescue any American citizen who might be charged with war crimes. Since this court is in the best position to prosecute terrorists or international outlaws such as Saddam Hussein, such a rejection of international law seems utterly baffling, until the background is made clear.⁹ This is a typical expression of crusading in contradiction to law. The president's military

doctrine, announced prior to the beginning of the Iraq War, authorized a fundamental change in American policy with regard to preemptive attacks against presumed terrorist nations; as evident in the Iraq War, this really amounts to a policy of preventive war, which is flatly forbidden by the United Nations Charter (drafted by the United States). The Bush administration actually seems to have taken pleasure in flaunting international law, saying repeatedly during the debate in the UN Security Council over the second Iraq resolution that the invasion would take place no matter whether authorization under international law was voted for or not. The crusade seems to require that law be set aside.

What is the background for this contempt for international law, which stands in such contrast to earlier American attitudes and which has evoked intense hostility and resistance from our closest allies, such as Germany? We show that there are two strands of biblical thought that gave shape to American religious history, one favoring judicial processes and the other advocating that the saints take the law into their own hands. The second strand explains the readiness on the part of the Bush administration to undermine civil rights that Americans have enjoyed for the past three centuries. In the USA PATRIOT Act passed by Congress a month after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (with only a few dissenting votes), a separate justice system was established for persons designated as terrorists. If the government so chooses, it is authorized to designate individuals as potential supporters of terrorism and to imprison them without a public charge or trial for an indefinite period. We know now what has happened in Guantánamo and elsewhere, but what is not so widely understood is how American religion played a role on both sides of this issue. We explore these themes throughout the book.

At the center of these puzzling changes is the view that emerged immediately after 9/11 of the president playing the widely admired role of a religious superhero who would lead the campaign to rid the world of evil. After a mediocre start and low opinion poll ratings, this person of modest abilities suddenly emerged as a super-president, someone authorized to stand above the law, wielding the incredible power at his fingertips to rout enemies and protect the innocent. His supporters have consistently employed the language of the cowboy or saintly superhero to describe his character. A staff member told the Fundamentalist magazine *World* that Bush is “God’s man at this hour.”¹⁰ General Jerry Boykin declared that Bush was in the White House “because God put him there for such a time as this . . . to lead not only this nation but . . .

the world.”¹¹ After the failure of the Iraq War became clear, this religious image was drastically reduced. But the question remains: What is the background of this astounding transformation? How could the limited office of president, as defined in the American Constitution, suddenly have the divine right of kings to unlimited power that the founding fathers of the country tried so assiduously to avoid?

To understand this political and cultural phenomenon, for example, we sketch the development of indigenous forms of popular entertainment, which began in the colonial period as adaptations of biblical stories. The fascinating development from the Indian captivity narratives of seventeenth-century New England to the cowboy westerns of the nineteenth century and the superhero tales of the twentieth will be traced in several chapters.¹²

We provide a critical survey of American religion that shows that it has been in some ways a blessing to the world but in other ways the source of great danger to world peace. Our contention is that the current menace derives not simply from the policies of George W. Bush but that it reflects the dark side of the American religious tradition. Our survey reaches beyond purely dimensions. We discuss historical, geographical, rhetorical, architectural, organizational, economic, rhetorical, and psychological dimensions of American religion in an effort to explain the role this dark side has played from 1607 to the present.

The history we trace here is a story that is widely overlooked in the current debates, yet it accounts in large part for the public attitudes that make the war against terrorism so problematic. We therefore analyze the interplay between religious groups and the state. What the sociologist Robert Bellah has called the American civil religion,¹³ a concept derived from Rousseau, is “a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality . . . as revealed through the experience of the American people.” According to the civil religion, “Our nation stands under higher judgment. . . . The American civil religion is not the worship of the American nation but an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality.”¹⁴ In place of an established religion, there developed a kind of “redeemer nation” concept, in which the nation plays the role of God’s New Israel in redeeming the world. Such rhetoric has frequently appeared in President Bush’s speeches.

In Robert Jewett’s writings in this area, including books coauthored with John Shelton Lawrence, a case is made that the American civil religion is bifur-

cated.¹⁵ There are two contradictory traditions. The first is zealous nationalism, which seeks to redeem the world by the destruction of enemies. This is the tradition that now dominates American behavior, as one can see in the Iraq War. We shall trace its development from early religious leaders, who adapted it from biblical sources such as the conquest narratives and the violent biblical books of Daniel and Revelation.

Alongside zealous nationalism runs the tradition of prophetic realism. It seeks to redeem the world for coexistence by the impartial enforcement of law. It also derives from the Bible, principally from the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and Paul.

Our contention is that these two strands in the American religious and political tradition have always been incompatible and that the strain has now reached the breaking point. The crusading impulse of zealous nationalism and the constitutional legacy of prophetic realism could remain in uneasy wedlock in earlier times, but cannot do so now when other cultures begin to exhibit similar, zealously militant tendencies that inspire lethal conflicts.¹⁶

The biblical foundations of organized American Christianity are also addressed. Many American churches, responding to their Reformation heritage, originally relied on European models of ecclesiastical organization, marked by the authority of ordained clergy within a system of governmental support. However, the spirit of revivalism streaming through American Christianity surged with a democratic ethos and led to the creation of religious movements that undercut clerical hierarchies in favor of innovative models of ministerial leadership. These included the predominant use of lay preaching in American evangelical traditions. Authoritarian organizational patterns were replaced by bottom-up organizations whose vitality and leadership derived from converted members. The inspiration and authority for this unique feature come from the Bible, particularly the letters of Paul that reflected an early Christian democratic church order. Since the seventeenth-century Puritans, this emphasis has created in American Christianity a series of dynamic religious movements that have empowered laypeople to claim scriptural authority for zealously championing a particular religious or ethical cause.

Finally, we trace the proliferation of apocalyptic movements in American history. An apocalyptic fixation is one of the most decisive features of American religious history, beginning with Puritanism in New England. Understanding how apocalyptic themes have been integrated into American secular and

religious ideologies, especially the recurrent motif that America stands at the center of a providential plan for the salvation of the world, is a major undertaking in our study. The apocalyptic drama of God versus Satan and saints versus evildoers assumed a central role in religious discourse and in the popular culture it spawned. This is closely associated with the fluid boundary between religion and entertainment, which we shall be exploring throughout the book.

Religious zeal in the democratic context of American society is profoundly ambivalent, with immense creative power as well as the capacity to encourage unwise and destructive crusades. Our aim is to clarify the central role of this religious zeal in both the healthy and the menacing sides of American culture.