

THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF AMERICAN IMPERIALISM

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INTRODUCTION

A priest in the Anglican Church of Korea once shared with me his image of Korea as a crucified people on a cross. In his vision the cross is formed by Russia at the top, Japan at the bottom, China to one side and the United States on the other. His image reflects his identity as a Christian and as a Korean. It points to the fact that there are some things that all four of those empires with aspirations towards world domination share, and that one aspect of their similarity is that each has caused the Korean people suffering. But the ways in which they have affected Korea are also very different. Korea's struggles with China and Japan have ancient roots, its relationship with Russia is more recent, and with the United States more recent still. In the early years of the twenty-first century, it is American imperialism that is affecting Korea and the rest of the world in the most immediate ways. That realization affects me personally both as a Christian and as an American.

The story of imperialism and the role it has played in world affairs is nearly as old as the record of human history itself. It has also played a significant role in biblical history. The exodus from Egypt, Israel's own efforts to dominate neighboring peoples,

its defeat at the hands of the Babylonian Empire and its subsequent exile, all testify to the importance of empire in the Hebrew scriptures. The Roman Empire and its agents assume the role of primary actors in the New Testament. The record of every significant event in Jesus' life involves the threatening presence of the power of Rome; the stories in the book of Acts and the apostolic writings are all shaped in one way or another by the political realities of the empire that controlled the far reaches of the Mediterranean world and even beyond.

1. Dimensions of Imperialism

All imperialism depends upon the belief by one nation or people that it has the *right* to impose its will on another and to establish a relationship of superiority that serves its own purposes. Such a belief is impotent without the *power* to achieve domination. That power can take many forms: military, economic, political, cultural, even religious – or all of them together. But beneath and behind the use of power is inevitably an ideology that supports and impels it. Often a significant aspect of that ideology is the assertion that domination not only serves the interests of the imperial power but also the well-being of the dominated.

The supporting ideology of much western imperialism has contained elements of national, racial, and religious superiority. Sometimes one has taken precedence over the other; occasionally they are confused or conflated. In the sixteenth century, Spain and Portugal justified the pillage of Latin America primarily on religious grounds: while they

were engaged in seizing the wealth and resources of the Native peoples they were also engaged in saving their souls. The British Empire believed it was spreading a superior civilization that was at once Christian, English and white. In the twentieth century, the Nazis tended to conceive of German identity as both racial and national and constructed a cult to undergird it.

2. Religious Dimensions of American Imperialism: Origins

While it is easy to recognize similarities between these earlier forms of imperialism and its current American form, a full understanding of the nature of American imperialism requires attention to its unique national sense of identity, whose origins can be found in the faith and assumptions of the English Puritan and Separatist colonists who helped to settle England's North American colonies.

England's earliest permanent North American settlements could not have been more different. Virginia was established by commercial speculators who were quite willing to share the faith of the Church of England with the Native people and the African slaves, whose non-Christian condition was considered to reduce them to a subordinate position as dependents of the English Crown. But religion was by no means the primary motivation for their efforts.

The New England colonies, on the other hand, were established by settlers with very different objectives. They were hoping for a place to practice their version of

Christian faith without the restrictions by which England was attempting to encourage national unity through religious conformity. Some were Puritans who considered that the Church of England had not yet completed its Reformation and wanted to eliminate all the traces of its old Roman Catholic heritage; others were more radical, believing that the very idea of an Established Church such as that of England was inevitably corrupted and corrupting. All were heirs of John Calvin, convinced that the Elect were those chosen by God to escape the sure punishment that would befall those not so fortunate; all were certain that faithful Christians should be responsible for government and not the other way around; and all believed in the scriptures as a sure and certain guide for every human action. All trusted profoundly in divine providence and saw the hand of God in every action and event; all interpreted those events in the light of the biblical stories which they believed themselves to be re-living.

Those beliefs dominated the spirituality and the theology of the early settlers of New England. In their own story of persecution and liberation, they saw themselves as the new People of God, oppressed by the English Pharaoh and escaping his clutches. In their departure from England they were living their own exodus. In their perilous journey across the Atlantic, they were reliving the experience of the Israelites making their way through the Red Sea. They had no doubt that America was the new Promised Land, that they themselves were God's New Israel, and that just as God had once taken the land of Canaan from its original inhabitants and given it to their spiritual ancestors, so now God was giving the land of the Native Americans into their hands. Just as the conquest of Canaan was assumed to demonstrate God's will, so the successful settlement of the

rugged landscape of North America and the defeat of its Native people was interpreted as the acting out of God's Providence.¹

The sermons, tracts, hymns and prayers which have survived from the early generations of New England's Christian settlers reveal all the major strains of the ideology that has shaped American imperialism: the special relationship between God and Americans, indeed their identity as "God's New Israel;" America's "manifest destiny" as revealed by its expansionist successes; and the unique mission entrusted by God to these earnest and hardy settlers, to be a "light to the nations."

Nowhere is that ideology more clearly articulated than in the famous address, "A Modell of Christian Charity," written by John Winthrop, leader of a large group of settlers, on board the ship *Arrabella*, as they approached the American coast. Winthrop began his essay with the observation that social distinctions between rich and poor, rulers and ruled, are God's will, not only for the good of the whole, but also to provide faithful people with opportunities for service to those over or under them, and to demonstrate human beings' mutual need of one another. Winthrop recognized the opportunity that their new setting provided for creating a civil and Christian society that would clearly reflect God's will, not only for themselves but also in order to be an example to the whole world.²

¹ Conrad Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, revised ed., 1998), 19-20, 26-27.

² John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," in Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel*, 37-38.

The colonists' efforts at establishing a "godly society" in accordance with God's will were to be based on a covenant. That enterprise, Winthrop warned, was not only a God-given calling but a profound challenge; God's support would be contingent upon their own continued faithfulness.

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world,...we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going....³

2. Religious Dimensions of American Imperialism: Evolution

The survival of the major themes of the faith of New England's earliest settlers has been thoroughly documented throughout the political and cultural history of the United States. Long before the American Revolution, the Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards had argued that the expected Millennium would probably begin in North America.⁴ Faith in a unique American destiny informed the Declaration of Independence by which the thirteen colonies of the Eastern Seaboard declared an end to their colonial relationship with Great Britain in 1776, and provided the principles for interpreting the surprising success of their armed struggle against one of the best armies in the world.

The United States, declared the famous nineteenth century American preacher Lyman Beecher, "is destined to lead the way in the moral and political emancipation of

³ "A Modell of Christian Charity," 39-40. I have modernized Winthrop's seventeenth century spelling.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, "The Latter-Day Glory Is Probably to Begin in America," in Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel*, 54-60.

the world.”⁵ Beecher’s 1835 book, *A Plea for the West*, argued that the western territory of the United States, still sparsely settled by Americans, would become the center of a civilization that would contribute mightily to worldwide evangelization. Indeed, he even admitted that Jonathan Edwards might be right in expecting the Millennium to begin on American soil, but he warned that the spread of the gospel could only succeed where American-style civil and religious freedom prevailed.

The same principles proclaimed by Beecher were used in the mid-nineteenth century to justify the war which ended with the annexation of forty percent of the territory of Mexico and, at the turn of the century, the capture of Puerto Rico, Cuba and several islands of the Pacific from Spain, the long and bloody conquest of the Philippines, and the seizure of the Panama Canal Zone with the collusion of that country’s small business community and its corrupt ambassador. Liberal Protestant leaders such as Lyman Abbott made it clear that they understood the “civilizing” of the world (by which they meant the spread of American institutions and culture) as an integral part of Christian mission: “[D]emocracy,” he wrote, “is not merely a political theory, it is not merely a social opinion; it is a profound religious faith.”⁶ He enthusiastically defended the right of the United States to impose American educational, cultural and religious institutions around the world.

It is said that we have no right to go to a land occupied by a barbaric people and interfere with their life. I deny the right of a barbaric people to retain possession of any corner of the globe. Barbarism has no rights which civilization is bound to respect.”⁷

⁵ Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* Cincinnati, OH: Truman and Smith, 1835, 10-11.

⁶ Quoted in Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 109.

⁷ Lyman Abbott, *The Rights of Man: A Study in Twentieth Century Problems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1901), 274.

In the 1960s, the sociologist Robert Bellah used the concept of *civil religion* to explain how American social and political history had been interpreted by a framework of belief which was essentially religious in nature. He emphasized that American civil religion “exists alongside and rather clearly differentiated from the churches,” and “though much is selectively derived from Christianity, this religion is clearly not itself Christianity.” However, its beliefs are obviously derived from a selective reading of the Biblical story; in this uniquely American public faith, “Europe is Egypt; America is the promised land. God has led his [sic] people to establish a new sort of social order that shall be a light to the nations.”⁸ Citing the religious references in President John F. Kennedy’s 1961 Inaugural Address, Bellah observes the prevalent belief that human rights as practiced in the United States “are more basic than any political structure and provide a point of revolutionary leverage from which any state structure may be radically altered. That is the basis for [Kennedy’s] reassertion of the revolutionary significance of America”⁹ – a significance, it might be added, that could and has also provided a rationale for intervention in the affairs of nations judged to be lacking in those God-given rights. Everything about American culture – its capitalist economy, its system of representative democracy, its two-party system, its individualism, its values, religion and culture -- is considered as an expression of God’s will and should therefore be shared by the rest of the world. Even when the civil religion Bellah described appeared to be

⁸ Robert

⁹ “Civil Religion in America,”

losing some of its strength in the later decades of the twentieth century,¹⁰ a newly militant evangelical Protestant Christianity emerged in the United States to re-affirm traditional belief in America's special relationship with God and its God-given global mission.¹¹

For nearly one hundred years, American imperialism was fed by its fear and hatred for Communism. Its conflict with the Soviet Union was, of course, in many ways a typical struggle of one empire against another. But American public opinion was routinely kindled against Communism because it was against religion, and Marxist ideological atheism was one of the reasons that the United States fought it so fiercely. That hatred and fear fed American participation in the Korean War over fifty years ago, and it still shapes the relationship between the United States and the Korean peninsula. More recently, Americans have been encouraged to interpret conflicts in the Middle East in religious terms, with Islam as the new enemy of both God and the United States.

People in other parts of the world, and indeed some Americans frequently interpret American imperialism as similar in every way to that of any other great power. They note the same sense of superiority, the same arrogance, the same insistence that its way is the only right way. And of course its imperialism has brought the United States enormous benefits and led it to the same kind of behavior that imperialism always brings to empires. But it is common for Americans to overlook the negative aspects of its behavior, and if they notice that the United States has prospered at the expense of other

¹⁰ See Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975, 1992) and R. Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, 2007)

¹¹ See John L. Kater, *Christians on the Right: The Moral Majority in Perspective* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982)

nations, they rarely blame imperialism; they interpret it as God's reward for their faithfulness. The noted Palestinian-born scholar of post-colonialism, Edward Said, pointed out this phenomenon:

[S]o influential has been the discourse insisting on American specialness, altruism and opportunity, that imperialism in the United States as a word or ideology has turned up only rarely and recently in accounts of the United States culture, politics and history. But the connection between imperial politics and culture in North America, and in particular in the United States, is astonishingly direct. American attitudes to greatness, to hierarchies of race, to the perils of other revolutions--the American Revolution being considered unique and somehow unrepeatable anywhere else in the world--these have remained constant, have dictated, have obscured the realities of empire while apologists for overseas American interests have insisted on American innocence, doing good, fighting for freedom.¹²

Of course there are some Americans, especially those in positions of power, who understand the ways American imperialism gives the United States military and economic advantages, and it is easy for them to manipulate public opinion by appealing to the old American sense that they have a special mission given to them by God. Most Americans now realize that the invasion of Iraq was a terrible mistake; but when it began, most supported it because they were led to believe they were "helping" the people of Iraq to become more like the United States. They were able to ignore the political, economic and even the military consequences of imperialism and believe the struggle was between God's enemies and what they would call "the American way of life." In doing so, they were acting out their peculiarly American religious heritage.

Commenting on American imperialism after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the American ethicist Gary Dorrien notes that with the exception of its own Native American

¹² Edward Said, "Culture and Imperialism," York University, Toronto, 10 February 1993 (<http://www.zmag.org/zmag/articles/barsaid.htm>)

tribal reservations, the United States – unlike most traditional empires – rarely engages in long-term political or military occupation of other peoples. Yet, he writes, “Since 1989, the United States has forged a new kind of empire – one not based on the conquest of territory – that outstrips all colonizing empires of the past.” He notes the overwhelming economic and military power represented by seven hundred fifty military bases around the world as well as other signs of American economic and technological dominance. “Moreover,” he writes,

the United States is not merely dominant; it assumes imperial responsibilities and reaps the benefits that derive from them. It is imperial in the sense of enforcing its own idea of world order in America's interest, presuming the right to lay down the rules of trade, commerce, security, and political legitimacy. It rewards or punishes nations on the basis of their willingness to create open markets, support American military policies, and establish pro-American governments. Today the U.S. is redesigning the economy of Iraq, ignoring longstanding Iraqi laws that limit foreign ownership and principles of international law that limit the powers of occupiers. Waging an offensive war to change the government of a sovereign country and restructure its economy is obviously an imperial enterprise. Doing it to consolidate one's power and change the political culture of a sprawling, explosive, multinational region halfway around the globe is more so on an unprecedented scale.¹³

4. Religious Dimensions of American Imperialism: Responses

Imperialism is always and everywhere a dangerous phenomenon. In the twenty-first century, the dangers it represents threaten the survival of the planet. People in other parts of the world can often counteract the negative political and economic aspects of American imperialism. But the religious dimension of American imperialism must also be understood and addressed.

¹³ Gary Dorrien, “Imperial Designs: Theological Ethics and the Ideologies of International Politics,” *Cross Currents*, Summer 2004 (<http://www.crosscurrents.org/Dorrien0204.htm>)

The new chapter of the history of globalization which we are currently living at the beginning of the twenty-first century has had severe political and economic consequences throughout the world. Many of those consequences can be traced to the dominance of an American political machine that blends neo-conservative economics with the vision of a “uni-polar world.” In Dorrien’s words, “The goal of the *Pax Americana* is to create American-style democracies throughout the world....That sentiment is amply rooted in the social gospel of the early twentieth century.”¹⁴

Furthermore, the spread of American ideas and culture has also carried with it a version of Christianity which enshrines the very values underlying American imperialism. All too often missionaries, supported and funded from the United States, convey the worldview of Christian America to other peoples. Attracted by its successes, ready audiences espouse individualism and competition, fear and distrust of those who hold different values or practice different religions, and look to the United States as patron and guide. They seem unwilling or unable to detect the religious imperialism that underlies such an expression of Christian faith.

The peculiar nature of American imperialism calls for a religious and theological response if it is to be fully countered. American Christians must learn to examine critically their assumption that God is always on America’s side, that Americans are God’s chosen people, and that the American way of life is always an accurate reflection of Christian values. American Christians need to be helped to understand that Christianity is a world religion, not an American religion, and that God does not have a

¹⁴ Dorrien, “Imperial Designs.”

special relationship with America and Americans. There is nothing specifically Christian about capitalism or a two-party political system or individualism; they are products of a particular American history and culture. Peace and justice and compassion are the true Christian values, and sometimes American imperialism violates them all. When American policies ignore the rights of other peoples, when its leaders forget the importance of peace, or when the right to intrude on other nations and their way of life is asserted, we encounter an ideology that rests ultimately on distorted theology.

Dorrien argues that the dangers of American imperialism must be lessened by a focus on the international community. Such a focus, he argues,

has a realistic basis: that the benefits of multilateral cooperation outweigh the costs and risks of not working together. A superpower that insists on absolute security for itself makes all other nations insecure. All parties are better off when the most powerful nations agree not to do everything that is in their power and nations work together to create new forms of collective security. In an increasingly interdependent world, single nation-states have to cooperate with each other to address security issues that transcend national boundaries.¹⁵

Forty years after the publication of his famous essay on American civil religion, Robert Bellah returned to the theme in the light of the current phenomenon of neo-conservative imperialism. “I would argue,” he writes, “that in the present world the very idea of national interests needs to be rethought. It is in the ultimate best interest of every nation that transnational institutions replace nation-state power politics...” But such a change requires attention to the cultural and religious underpinnings of American-style imperialism.

¹⁵ Dorrien, “Imperial Designs.”

A chance for another course, another role for America in the world, depends ultimately on the reform of our own cultures. A culture of unfettered individualism combined with absolute world power is an explosive mixture. A few religious voices have been raised to say so. The question of the hour is whether our fellow citizens, not to mention our leaders, are ready to hear such voices.¹⁶

American Christians clearly bear the brunt of the burden of rescuing their national life from the distorted religious ideology which supports the imperial project. But people of faith and wisdom in other parts of the world can lend their voices as well.

It is appropriate that the first Korean astronaut in space, Yi So-Yeon, supply the postscript to this analysis. Reflecting on the experience of her sojourn, she commented,

The Earth looks so blue, beautiful, idle and peaceful. It makes me regret the way I have lived there, always competing with others. There is no nationality in space, since we must cooperate in order to survive. I believe it is the same on Earth. I wish we can all live in peace and harmony on it too.¹⁷

¹⁶ Robert N. Bellah, "The New American Empire: The Likely Consequences of the 'Bush Doctrine'," in Wes Avram, ed., *Anxious About Empire: Theological Essays on the New Global Realities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 26.

¹⁷ Quoted in Michael Breen, "No Space for Nationalism in Space," *The Korea Times* (April 18, 2008), 6.

ABSTRACT

American imperialism is often considered to be similar to that practiced by other nations throughout history. This article argues that while it shares many characteristics with other forms of imperialism, an adequate understanding and response to American imperialism must take into account its unique religious interpretation of the nation's destiny. This facet of American national identity is ultimately derived from the faith of the early Puritan and Separatist settlers of New England who believed that their history reflected the history of the people of Israel. It lent itself to a "civil religion" that continued to conceive of the United States as a "light to the nations" with a special God-given mission and calling, and has recently re-emerged in militant American Evangelicalism.

Key Words

American imperialism, Pax Americana, Puritan, Church of England, New England, post-colonialism, the invasion of Iraq, globalization, neo-conservative economic, civil religion, militant American Evangelism.