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AMERICAN CHRISTIAN MYTHS

There are a number of myths about Christian “heritage” in the country now known as the United States of America. Many of these myths are so accepted in American life that they are no longer seen as other than simple fact. In the interest of having a clear understanding of important American historical and cultural roots, I’d like to explore three of these Christian myths, and to look at their applicability to the modern USA.

WHAT IS A MYTH?

This question is not easy to answer. To some people, the word implies a made-up story, a fable or fairy tale: the myth of the Loch Ness Monster, or the Easter Bunny. These people might already be offended by the title of this newsletter, thinking that I intend to question the truth of Christianity itself. To academics, the word “myth” has a more precise meaning:

Mythology is defined as a collection of interrelated stories of a given culture. Myths tend to describe the creation of the world and give a culture an understanding of the events of nature and the world around them. Myths are also generated to tell the story of the first people to inhabit the earth. (www.mnsu.edu)

What I will do is examine some historical and cultural myths that form the basis of the claim, made by some, that the USA is a Christian nation. (For the record, I believe that the Christian myth is a correct way to engage and understand the truth of God.)

#1: CITY ON A HILL

In a 1974 speech titled “The Shining City upon a Hill,” then-President Ronald Reagan made numerous references to the greatness of America. (I wonder if his speechwriters ever considered that use of the term “America” would normally include all of North, Central and South America?) One image he used was taken from John Winthrop, who had likened the Massachusetts Bay Colony that he founded to a city on a hill, which itself is a reference to a Bible verse: “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid” (Matthew 5:14).

For Winthrop to use this image makes perfect sense. The Massachusetts Bay Colony, it is generally agreed by historians, was a theocracy, in which church membership was compulsory and was tied to civil rights such as voting. It was “biblically” organized.

Today the USA is a representative democracy, not a theocracy. No federal laws compel people to attend church, and voting isn’t tied to anything except age and citizenship. Reagan used the “city on a hill” myth without cultural accuracy. He applied the experience of one small geographical area to the entire country’s cultural heritage, completely overlooking the much earlier cultural contributions of indigenous, Spanish, English, French and Dutch settlements in the New World, and later contributions from Jews, Moslems, and those of no religion.

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“Standing on the tiny deck of the Arabella in 1630 off the Massachusetts coast, John Winthrop said, “We will be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we 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 byword throughout the world.” Well, we have not dealt falsely with our God, even if He is temporarily suspended from the classroom.” —R. Reagan



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"You can call it mysticism if you want to, but I have always believed that there was some divine plan that placed this great continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an abiding love of freedom and a special kind of courage"—R. Reagan

American Christian Myths, continued

#2: CHRISTIAN FOUNDING FATHERS

The Southern Baptist-affiliated Quartz Hill School of Theology devotes a webpage to the myth of the "Christian" Founding Fathers in the USA. They note that though "many well-intentioned Christians argue that the United states was founded by Christian men on Christian principles, *"the men who wrote the Declaration of Independence and put together the Constitution were not Christians by any stretch of the imagination."* Their website (<http://www.theology.edu/journal/volume2/ushistor.htm>) gives details on each of the men (wrongly) held in high esteem as followers of Christ.

Thomas Jefferson "created his own version of the Gospels," cutting and pasting (literally!) to produce a text with no mention of any miracles. Both Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin were Deists; John Adams denied the Trinitarian Christian doctrine and became a Unitarian.

The Declaration of Independence is often held up as proof of the Christian faith of the Founding Fathers, and it does, indeed, invoke God in the first sentence (after Nature). However, the following sentences also invoke the Creator, Prudence, and Divine Providence, all names which might reference the Christian God but also might reference Allah, Jehovah, or Gaia.

Sometimes the Pledge of Allegiance is used as evidence that the Founding Fathers were Christians; in fact, the Pledge was written in 1892 by Francis Bellamy, an American Socialist, and "under God" was added in 1954. "In God we trust" was not put on US currency by the Founding Fathers; it was added in 1854.

#3: DIVINE PROVIDENCE & MANIFEST DESTINY

The concept of divine providence is another myth that has shaped American foreign policy. Journalist John O'Sullivan coined the phrase "manifest destiny" in the 1830's, giving the growing country a perfect rationale for expansion into territories held by native Americans and other European countries.

As early as 1751 Benjamin Franklin described a destiny for Americans to fill up new lands to the west, and Jefferson, Monroe, and Adams all expressed expansionist dreams. In the 1840s, however, under Presidents Tyler and Polk, the territory of the United States increased by nearly eight hundred million acres through the annexation of Texas, the acquisition of Oregon south of the forty-ninth parallel, the military conquest of California and New Mexico, and the assumption of Native American lands in the Great Lakes region as those tribes were forced to resettle on the Great Plains. Not only was the expansion of the 1840s dramatic in its extent, it was also quite aggressive and nationalistic in tone. Americans justified the expansion with the ideology of "Manifest Destiny," invoking divine providence, national superiority and exceptionalism. (<http://hti.osu.edu/history-lesson-plans>)

To invoke God's plans as the reason for expansion allowed the USA to overlook any criticism that it was acting like King George had acted in 1776: ruling by force and using military power to expand—with the added mythological strength of the will of God.

Many subsequent US military incursions have used this myth's substance as justification: in Vietnam, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Grenada, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq, to name just a few countries, US troops were "preserving democracy" or "guaranteeing freedom," which are coded phrases that call upon the myth of divine providence.

WHY RELY ON MYTHS?

An anthropologist would laugh at me for asking such a naïve question. Myths are the glue that holds society together. Myths provide the basis of the collective consciousness that Jung wrote about. Myths are crucial in times of crisis and sacrifice, to give people a sense of urgency and mission that enables them to be courageous and tough. Without myths, a culture will become weak and diffuse.

The USA certainly needs myths. But I would argue that the myths should be inclusive, taking into account the diversity that is the USA in the 21st century. You can be a good citizen without falling back on American Christian myths.