

America and the Theocratic Vision Why America Is Not a Christian Nation [and, Pray God, Never Will Be]

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I invite your attention to the rather long and cumbersome title of this Earl Lecture, “America and the Theocratic Vision, or Why America is Not a Christian Nation [and, Pray God, Never Will Be].” My message, in spite of the lengthy title, is quite simple and can be told with considerable brevity – although I shall do my best to meet conventional expectations for an occasion like this and take the customary amount of time that lectures usually take to deliver my remarks. The core of the message is this: we are not a Christian nation because we earnestly tried to be such, three and a half centuries ago, and we found out it simply didn't work. And the reason it didn't work goes to the heart of what this nation, in its finest moments, is all about and that's why – as the final part of the title suggests – not only are we not a Christian nation but also, pray God, never will be.

This, in essence, is what I propose to explore and examine with you over the course of the next half hour or so. And I propose that we begin at the beginning – or at least fairly close to America's first days as they were being experienced in the colonies of New England. That means, of course, returning to the era of the Puritans and the vision that fired their imagination and kindled their determination to achieve here in the new world what they had been unable to bring to fruition in the old.

When one speaks of Puritanism in America, it is customary to begin with Cotton Mather, that dour old 17th century divine who has been so greatly maligned down through the years. One writer has spoken of him as “the agent of the superstition and barbarism that has been happily expelled from America” [Wendell, *Cotton Mather*, 1963]. That turns out to be one of the kinder things said about him; a quarter century after Mather had the remarkable foresight to propose inoculation against an outbreak of smallpox in Boston, he was being ridiculed – by a member of the medical profession, no less – as a symbol of “all [that]the rational mind holds anathema” [ibid., p. xiv]. A century later, he was dismissed as “a fanatic, unscrupulously and hypocritically vain,” while a New England historian and president of Harvard termed him “a credulous old fool.”

Both fascinating and troubling though he is, it is not Cotton Mather whom I wish to call attention to this morning. Instead, I recommend for our consideration his father, Increase Mather – so named, according to his father, because “of the never-to-be-forgotten Increase, of every sort, wherewith God favored the country, about the time of his [birth].” Increase Mather – for thirty nine years minister of Second Church, Boston and for sixteen of those thirty nine years president of Harvard College – in many respects towers over the record and reputation of his son. In the

intensity of his Puritan passions, in the fervor of his Calvinistic convictions, Increase Mather had few rivals. Born in 1639, he took his degree at Harvard in 1656 and on his birthday, a year later, preached his first sermon in the village church at Dorchester. In May, 1664, Increase accepted the call to Second Church where he subsequently spent the rest of his career.

Increase Mather was part of the second generation of that band of men who came to this country determined to found a nation where, as one of his son's biographers put it, "for once the laws of God and man should coincide." We need not concern ourselves with the elaborate theology on which this determination rested. Suffice it to note that these early arrivals, among whom were Increase Mather's father Richard and his father-in-law, John Cotton, came to these shores from England to find a country in confusion as to what civil law should govern this fledgling society. The newly arrived clerics proceeded to suggest, as Cotton Mather describes it, "statutes form the laws wherewith God governed his ancient people," and to propose "that none should be electors nor elected [i.e., voters or holders of public office] except as were visible subjects of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this and in many other ways, Mather concludes, "[they] propounded unto them an endeavor after a theocracy, as near as might be, to that which was the glory of Israel." [Ibid., p. 9].

Poor Increase spent his entire life, along with his son, fighting to advance and preserve this theocratic vision in the governance of New England and to maintain Harvard as an institutional reservoir of theocratic orthodoxy. The Mathers persisted in appealing for fidelity to what they earnestly believed was a divinely ordered way of life. They found themselves sounding the death-cry of an old theocratic order whose course they could not help but realize was lost, "even as the ground that all New England stood on crumbled beneath their feet."

Increase lived to see his theocratic dream collapse. The Royal Charter that governed the colony of Massachusetts and which granted the right to vote and elect all public officeholders to church members in good standing was revoked in 1686. In its place, a new charter conferred electoral rights on all freeholders. With the revocation of the Royal Charter, that governing Harvard College collapsed as well; among other things, the college charter had vested power in a self-perpetuating board. Increase Mather, during his tenure as president, had selected every single member of the governing board. Increase saw Harvard gradually lose its orthodox rigor as "liberal" [read: Unitarian] influences increasingly held sway.

Thus, with the collapse of the Royal Charter, Increase failed in his effort to establish a commonwealth guided by God and His anointed. And with the revocation of the Harvard College Charter, Increase failed in his attempt to create an institution devoted to the preparation of those who, under divine authority, would guide the affairs of this holy commonwealth. And so, his biographer writes with an obvious tinge of remorse, "the good President... who had won for Massachusetts the Charter under which she had flourished for more than eighty years, who had given every energy of his life to the defense of the old theocracy of the fathers, was left at sixty-two just with what he had at twenty-five and what he remained with all the rest of his life – the ministry of Second Church Boston."

Three hundred years later, we look back on the life and times of Increase Mather with a mixture of sadness and relief. It is always a matter of regret to contemplate the life of a person who tried with such passionate devotion to follow what he genuinely believed to be the will of God in his life and to instill that same sense of faithful obedience in the lives of those around him, only to see his hopes and convictions crumble and the society which he tried his best to lead in one direction go instead along a completely different path. There is, in fact a note of pathos in one of the last speeches he gave in which he said about Boston, the city in which he had labored so

earnestly: “There is yet a number of Godly People in the town; they may be brought low but the Town should be preserved.” But of the era in which he lived and worked, he lamented: “There will be no settled Good Times, I suppose, until the second coming of the Lord.”

But we have to be relieved – profoundly and gratefully relieved – that Increase Mather lost his battle to turn Boston into the citadel of what would have been an American theocracy. And it is not simply because of the much-discussed and oft-ridiculed grimness with which Mather and the Puritans viewed life – their penchant for passing laws against mixed dancing, card-playing, bowling, shuffleboard, making minced pies, cooking on the Sabbath and other such regulations. Our relief stems from the recognition that what the Puritans envisioned was a state or a nation “in which political rights [were to be] subordinated to religious conformity,” with magistrates chosen from a narrow group “whose authority was beyond the reach of the popular will, with ministers serving as a court of last resort to interpret divine law to the subject-citizens of Jehovah.”

Those are the words, in large part, of John Cotton, Increase Mather’s father-in-law. And it is what Cotton terms “religious conformity” that is the nub of the problem. What does religious conformity mean? For the Puritans, much like their ideological descendents in our time, it clearly meant conforming to their understanding of God’s will, their interpretation of what the Scriptures say, and their version of what the Christian life ought to look like. Consequently, Increase Mather and his cohorts not only had immense difficulties with the likes of dissenters such as Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson – one of the orthodox brethren declared about the dissenters “all familists, antinomians, Anabaptists, and other Enthusiasts shall have free liberty....To keep away from us” – they also had problems and conflicts within their own ranks. When two young Harvard upstarts, for example, suggested that church membership should not have to depend on the requirement of making a public declaration of a conversion experience before the congregation – the colonial equivalent of a “born-again” experience – the Mathers, Increase and Cotton, unleashed a vitriolic attack on “that malignant company of grievous Revolters” who, in their view of things, were departing from the true faith.

It was this impulse, in fact, that proved to be the Achilles Heel of the theocratic vision. For alongside the Puritan desire to create a community governed only by the laws of God as interpreted by his duly ordained servants, there ran an older, more fundamental Protestant impulse and conviction – that of the priesthood of all believers. It was this conviction that fired the passions of the dissenters and that eventually hoisted the Puritans on their own theological petard. For ironically, once one takes the position – as the Puritans did – that kings and bishops have no special religious authority and that the Scriptures alone are the sole source for discovering the Divine Will, the question eventually arises: but who is to interpret Scripture?

And the idea of the priesthood of all believers ultimately drives one back – as it did in the colonial era – to the conviction that anyone and everyone must be free to interpret and understand Scripture and the will of God as he or she chooses. It was this that brought about the collapse of the theocratic vision in which God’s anointed serve “as interpreters of divine law: for the subject-citizens of Jehovah.”

This conviction of the priesthood of all believers did something else – something of far more lasting importance and influence in American history and society. It fed the democratic impulse in our nation – those fundamental ideals of equity and fairness that make us basically resistant to the notion that anyone – priest, preachers, politician, professor, or even president should be able to determine or dictate for all of us what is the approved or righteous or patriotic path we ought to tread.

It was the democratic ideal which proved to be the ultimate downfall of the theocratic vision. For any theocratic vision rests – as do those that present themselves today in the declarations and agendas of the right-wing of American Christianity – on some poor mortal’s idea or interpretation of what God’s will is. And for every such interpretation or idea, there will be, thank God, a dissenting voice, and as long as we preserve ourselves as a democracy and not a theocracy, that dissenting voice will have just as much of a place in the public discussion and debate as that which presents itself as the true voice or will of the Almighty.

What then, do we do, we who consider ourselves part of the progressive Christian witness in America, we who are appalled by the right-wing religious agenda and alarmed by the extent to which it has bullied its way into the public square, proclaiming the process of public discourse is empty or naked because its voice is not being heard, and then proceeding to proclaim its views – its denunciations, its “woes to you that...”, its anathemas with such vigor and venom that reasonable discussion is all but made impossible...what are we religious liberals or progressives – whatever your term of choice – what are we to do?

Our outcry is almost like that of the multitude at Pentecost, what shall we do to be saved and hopefully to save the nation from this scourge of pomposity and arrogance that purports to speak for God – in God’s name and for God’s sake – telling us what we ought to think and believe and how our lives ought to be ordered and the affairs of the nation conducted? How shall we to be saved from this 21st century attempt to resurrect and relive a failed 17th century experiment?

Forgive me! I forgot momentarily that this is supposed to be an Earl lecture – not an Earl sermon. Let’s return to quieter waters but let us feel the same urgency of the question: what do we who count ourselves as Christians but progressively so, what do we do in the midst of an era in which all of life is defined and valued by non-religious – even irreligious – considerations, in which the Religious Right can only exhort us to return to a pre-modern, King Jamesian world of religious absolutism – one in which ecclesiastical bureaucracy in the form of religious crusades and single-issue organizations like Focus on the Family are substituted for the beloved community?

We can begin our response – we can begin what we do – with that most basic and fundamental of Christian virtues: the recognition that true Christianity lies not in what one proclaims but in what one is and does! Let the Right fulminate about what God wants and what God approves and what God dislikes, let us go about the quiet, steady work of God’s kingdom – of building the beloved community – one brick or stone at a time, for was it not the Lord’s brother who taught us that pure and undefiled religion – real religion, authentic religion, if you will – is looking to the needs of the fatherless and the widows in their affliction while trying our best to stay untainted by the allures of an “it’s-all-about-me” world!

And while we’re about it, let us reject, with equal passion, the heresies on the Left as well as those on the Right. Liberal Protestantism has always had a soft spot for its excesses and we are currently witnessing the full flower of some of those excesses in these New Age, Prosperity Gospel movements that have sprung up wherever religious liberalism has become uneasy with the Christian doctrines of sin, salvation and redemption and become, instead, enamored with ideas of self-realization. The Christian Left has sown in the wind and we are now reaping the whirlwind of our own liberal inclinations.

Instead, let us set ourselves to the task of showing this nation and the world what has always been true: the kingdom of God – the beloved community – is always an ideal beyond our reach and our grasp. That is why we cannot transform America into a Christian nation or anything even

close to it. But there is also no other way to manifest our faith as Christians – our belief in what we are summoned to do and be – than to unceasingly reach out for and strive toward that ideal that is the beloved kingdom of God.

We never confuse that ideal with the nation-state – that is the fatal, even blasphemous error that the Christian Right makes. The kingdom of God will always remain a vision of what ought to be – never a reality in our or any other temporal time sphere. God’s kingdom can never be equated with or even approximated by anyone’s national experiment or experience. This doctrinal error is one that the Christian Right must be continually reminded of: its false patriotisms and idolatrous claims that would have us believe that America is somehow a chosen vessel of God is, to use the pungent language of our Puritan spiritual ancestors, a stench in the nostrils of the Almighty!

In April, 1944, when the Second World War was in one of its most perilous periods – several months before D-Day and the decisive shift in favor of the Allies – H. Richard Niebuhr, that quieter – in some respects more cerebral – counterpart to his brother Reinhold, wrote:

“There are days, at the end of winter when the increasing brightness of the sun does not so much promise the coming of spring as reveal the shabbiness and uncleanness of the winter scene. Our day in history is something like that. Reflection and feeling apprehend the morbidity of secular civilization, but the promise of newness of life they do not discern” [in *Theology Today* 1, April, 1944, p. 5].

I do not know of a more apt description of our own time. We have a keen sense of the morbidity of the present moment – the spectre of terrorism and the uncertainty of when and where it might strike, the bombastic response of our government which has gone on a rampage that has destroyed the lives of thousands of our youth and countless thousands of innocent civilians in Iraq, a government that makes light of global warming, that likes to sound tough and uncompromising while it doesn’t have a clue as to what it is that we face that threatens to overwhelm us, and the apparent indifference of vast numbers of Americans to all of this, as long as their I-Pods work and they can go skiing on the weekends – there simply is no better description of the morbidity of our times than this.

But it is in precisely such moments that we are called upon to raise the banner of Christ – not the flag of nationalism and false patriotism that baptizes every pronouncement or program of the government with divine blessing but that banner which says we will go only where the feet of Christ have trod – only the way of reconciliation and peace.

What more can or need we say. If God be for us, says Paul, who can be against us! And that means if we really have the courage of our convictions – if we really believe that “the right” is on our side – not with those who identify God with every human prejudice of bigotry nameable or imaginable or more Biblically, if we believe that we are on the right side – then we shall prevail. We shall overcome. To God be the glory! Amen.