Book Review

Andrew R. Murphy.
Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11.
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Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

> As for... the present generation in New-England... your fathers were such as did serve the Lord... they were Abrahams... Davids... there never was a generation that did so perfectly shake off the dust of Babylon... as the first generation of Christians that came into this land for the Gospel's sake.
>
> - Cotton Mather 1679

The general theme of this review is the relationship between religion and politics. The specific topic of the book under review is religion in American public life and, more particularly the place and purpose of the "jeremiad" in the rhetorical style and substance of the American historical narrative. This is an important theme not only for those wishing to understand the domestic politics of the United States of America, but also to those who are, by chance or by choice, engaged in formal and informal relations with the US government, business and non-governmental organizations.

Religion and Global Conflict

It should go without saying that anyone interested in the global political economy and with the many areas of public policy related to international affairs—environmental sustainability, human rights, trade and commerce, foreign aid, world health initiatives, electronic communications regulation, the travel and tourism industries and a host of others—must be aware of the threat to local, regional and global stability arising from armed conflict, whether in the form of terrorism, civil conflict or outright war.

It should also go without saying that one of the most important elements in human conflict today is religion. In the West, citizens are normally invited by their governments, educational systems and the mass media to think of religious conflict as something attaching mainly to the "Other." Conveniently forgetting the history of internal conflict among Christians, most recently in Northern Ireland, they are encouraged to believe that the fundamental sites of religious hostilities lie elsewhere. Even incidents such as the mass murder of young Norwegians by a right-wing, religiously motivated extremist are classed as the acts of individual madmen and not an extreme expression of religious-cultural intolerance. So, Westerners focus on Hindu-Muslim tensions in South Asia, recent events in Sri Lanka, charges of repression of religious freedom in China, the multiplicity of complications in the Near East and so on. Rarely do they critically examine their own heritage; and, when they do, they do so mainly historically with the effect of placing their own religious preoccupations and prejudices in a bygone era, thus failing to acknowledge their influence on their attitudes and actions today.

Religion, especially in the Abrahamic tradition (the linked forms of which are, broadly speaking, Judaism, Christianity and Islam), is nothing if not a faith-based instrument for identifying moral preferences and encouraging believers to behave in a manner that is consistent with specific moral precepts derived from expressions of the "will of God." From the Mosaic "Ten Commandments" to the "Beatitudes" and on to "Sharia Law," divinely inspired rules of conduct have been an essential part of these religions. Understanding the connection and consequences of religious belief for public policy and political life is a long-neglected project, especially for people not used to turning the lens of historical, hermeneutic and social scientific analysis back upon themselves, rather than projecting it outward upon subject, colonial and "third world" cultures.

So, while it is now fashionable—and seemingly urgent—for Christians and Jews to parse the Islamic faith and to confront what is alleged to be an unbreakable link between Islam and violence, participants in the Christian legacy are resistant to allowing themselves to be examined in the same way. Yet, the religious foundations of Western polities, especially as expressed by their political and intellectual leaders are seldom less firm than those of others, just more effectively disguised, less brashly displayed, more polished, better hidden in plain sight.

Religion and the American Polity

When what is called the "Judaeo-Christian tradition" is invoked, specifically as the foundational belief of the American republic and the common inspiration of the "founding fathers" of the United States of America, it is seldom depicted as an ideology of aggression and expansion. Instead, it is described as a set of "self-evident truths" to which any good and reasonable person should subscribe. Moreover, when it is associated with conflict of any sort, as in Huntington's far-famed notion of the "clash of civilizations," it is portrayed as a benign array of principles under attack from external, nefarious and even demonic forces. So, following the events of 11 September 2001, President George W. Bush spoke of the "evil-doers" and the "axis-of-evil," and explained that the enemies of the United States were hostile because "they hate our freedoms." In such discourses, religion is not generally advanced as a justification for Western expansion and global hegemony, but as a legitimation of defensive responses to wholly inexcusable external threats.

The perceived threats to American society are, of course, not merely external (the "terrorists"), but are also increasingly internal. So, Christian televangelists now commonly make claims that domestic moral decay is to blame for any number of calamities, which they interpret as divine retribution for immorality in thought, word and deed. Medical epidemics such as HIV/AIDS and natural disasters including the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina have been described as divine punishments for the erosion of "family values" and specifically attributed to the political advances made by feminists and gay activists. While not necessarily the views of the majority of Americans, the strength of such beliefs should not be discounted. Once shrugged off as the backward opinions of an uneducated and dwindling minority at the fringe of a

dynamic modern society, these fundamentalist opinions seem to be on the rise, not only in America's cultural backwaters, but in the main stream of political life. So, as well as imagining divine intervention to punish abortionists, adulterers, blasphemers and the like, the "culture wars" now include desperate struggles to banish the theory of evolution from the science curricula in American schools, and even to remove the "liberal" Thomas Jefferson from American history textbooks (to be replaced by John Calvin). Such initiatives have occasionally been successful.

One of the principal effects of the affirmation of fundamentalist Christian beliefs as expressed by the radical religious right and the candidacies of people such as Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann for the highest political positions in the land is that it has brought religion to the forefront of political controversy. In both domestic policies (funding stem cell research, seeking to overturn *Roe v. Wade* 410 [the US Supreme Court decision that affirmed a woman's limited access to abortion], defunding organizations such as the Planned Parenthood Association), and in international programs (foreign aid and developmental assistance, overt and covert military actions under the umbrella of the "war on terror," sporadic and often opportunistic support for universal human rights) religious beliefs are constant refrains summoned either to defend or to condemn policy innovations.

Criticisms of Murphy

Andrew R. Murphy's *Prodigal Nation* is designed to describe and explain the connection between religion and politics in the United States. As an essay in political science, it is generally successful, though some critics have taken note of three alleged weaknesses. Let me deal and dispense with them at the outset.

First, critics say that the book is not comprehensive, and complain that many examples of moralistic Christianity are omitted or glossed over. To this the apt response is that Murphy makes no claim to being encyclopaedic. He focuses on three main representative eras—the Puritan origins, the Civil War and the contemporary rise of the religious right. He ought not to be castigated for failing to write the book he did not intend to write and does not claim to have written. Anyone interested in filling in the acknowledged gaps will find an abundant specialized literature and, in fact, even the topics that Murphy highlights have received exhaustive treatment elsewhere (see, for instance, see George C. Rable's much-lauded *God's Almost Chosen People*, and Chris Hedges robust critique of the current rise of right-wing fanaticism in *American Fascists*).

Second, Murphy has been accused of failing to add substantially to what is already known about the subject, largely through the labours of historians such as the Canadian Americanist, Sacvan Bercovitch, (*The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, 1975; and *The American Jeremiad*, 1978), who covered much the same ground. This may be, but in light of the importance of the theme, rehearsing the matter for new generations cannot be a wholly unjustified project. I leave it to professional historians who specialize in these fields of US history to judge whether Murphy's study contributes significantly to the understanding of deep historical currents, but it certainly adds something to our

appreciation the constancy of religion in the American experience and the background of current events.

Finally, Murphy has been criticized for failing to put the American experience in a proper comparative perspective. It should be obvious to historians and anthropologists alike that findings of the entwining of religious belief and political ideology and action can be made throughout human history. European history in particular is sated with examples of the political influence of religious institutions and movements from the authoritative and dominant Churches (Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic) to radically dissenting Reformation-era heretics (e.g., Taborites, Hussites, Lollards the followers of Thomas Münster and John of Leyden) and innumerable others before and since. At times, clerical and civil authorities have been rivals and at other times they have been almost indistinguishable. And, in opposition to authority, millennerian sects have arisen both in imperial centres and in parts of the globe which have been overcome and subdued by European colonialists (Melanesian "cargo cults," the "Ghost Dance" religion of the Plains Indians, Rastafarians in Jamaica). All of them and many more in the non-Christian world could be assembled to provide data for a comprehensive examination of religion and politics; but, again, Professor Murphy did not set out to write comparatively or universally, and is not culpable for failing to do so. His interest is in the persistence of the pattern of religious fervour throughout American history and its association with and influence upon the enduring and evolving American ideology. As I have previously commented (*Culture and Difference*, 2011), a common characteristic of millenarianism is the desire to explain situations of stress when traditional belief systems no longer adequately account for social upheavals and extraordinary disruptions of normal life. Although there are notable increases in religious zeal during times of crisis, the American experience is singular, for religiosity forms an uncommon thread running through the fabric of American society over four centuries of history, including periods of vast economic, political and social transformations. It surely merits study on its own.

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The American Jeremiad

The principal project of *Prodigal Nation* is to dissect one particular structure of Christian thought in the evolution of culture and governance of the United States of America. Its method is to give specific attention to the rhetorical device of the jeremiad—that form of lamentation that decries moral decadence and opens up the possibility of a restoration of faith and salvation through atonement, submission and redemption. There is much to consider here.

Western social science and policy analysis have often been used in the process of decoding the belief systems of the "Other," and seeking to substitute the presumptions of Western epistemology, technology and ideology for what the Americans, the British and, for that matter, the Romans have regarded as inferior, subordinate and barbaric cultures.

Whole populations of African, Asian, Latin American and countless aboriginal peoples have been defined by theoretical assumptions that take the rational-legal, instrumental, secular, technologically mediated culture of the West as the norm, and measure the "development" and "maturity" or the relative "backwardness" of "underdeveloped" societies in terms of their capacity to "measure up" on Western scales of advancement. From such a "governmentalist" and "assimilationist" perspective, the task of public policy is the "management" of sometimes recalcitrant communities, tribes and nations with little or no regard for alternative, indigenous ways of thought, experience and expression (cf. Rondinelli, pp. 23-64). What Western models rarely do is to look into a cultural mirror to discern in what ways and to what degree their own religiosity insinuates itself into public life.

In *Prodigal Nation*, Andrew R. Murphy surveys American history and highlights a theme that cannot be dismissed as an anomaly or as a cultural undercurrent that can safety be subsumed within the larger narrative of the ineluctable drive to modernity and thereby dismissed as an interesting but fading antiquarian relic. Instead, the deep religiosity and the structure of the jeremiad mythology are revealed as an essential element in forging of what passes for the American political character. Accordingly, anyone contemplating public policy innovations in the United States, or seeking to apply American models to bilateral or multilateral programs, would do well to consider the manner and the extent to which religious belief is held to be a test of government action within and extending from the American cultural context. At least since the presidency of Ronald Reagan and perhaps since that of Jimmy Carter, the influence of fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity upon American foreign and domestic policy has been discernible and sometimes determinant. Assessing its impact on policy requires an investigation of the historical background of this enduring cultural phenomenon.

Morals and Ethics

Before assessing Murphy's contribution to this project, it is important to consider the basic elements of the discussion of the relationship between religion, normative judgement and specific cultural and ideological formations. For my purposes, the relationship among ethics, morals and public life begs clarification, and the initial distinction between ethics and morals may be most important of all. This may strike some as strange because, in common parlance and in any Internet thesaurus, ethics and morals are assumed to be all but synonymous. I shall begin by offering a challenge to this assumption.

It is my habit, sometimes seeking to disarm external critics and sometimes merely to protect my own sanity, to distinguish between morals and ethics. Not all, many or even any of today's working philosophers will agree with me, I am sure, but I do find the distinction useful in sorting out what I believe about problems associated with "good" and "evil." To me, morals have to do with substantive questions such as those arising from discussions of abortion and euthanasia, unusual sexual practices, the duty to tell the truth and to keep promises, the obligations of charity, war and peace, and, of course, the matters of dishonouring our parents and not coveting our neighbour's belongings. They

involve judgements of behaviour as measured against a code or standard of right and wrong acts which may or may not involve questions of criminal or civil law.

In the alternative, although the line is sometimes blurred, ethics have mainly to do with procedural matters. They concern questions about how we arrive at moral conclusions. So, we can distinguish between *Robert's Rules of Order* and assessments of whether Parliament has passed a good or a bad law. The first sets out a sort of applied ethics and tells us the procedurally correct way to come to a judgement. The second involves a determination of whether the result has been morally correct. Likewise, we can differentiate between adherence to the rules of criminal procedure in a court (was the trial "fair"?) from the appraisal of whether an innocent defendant has been wrongly convicted or a guilty one has gone unpunished.

> "It doesn't matter *what* you think; it only matters *how* you think."
> - Christopher Hitchens

For support in my favouring form over content, I go to Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for All Seasons*, wherein Thomas More responds to Roper, a young man "with an all-consuming rectitude" according to the playwright's notes: " … let me draw your attention to a fact," says More, "I am *not* God. The currents and eddies of right and wrong, which you find plain-sailing, I can't navigate, I'm no voyager. But in the thickets of the law, oh there I'm a forester." And when the young man objected: "So now you'd give the Devil benefit of law," declaring that he'd "cut down every law in England to [get after] the Devil," More responds: "Oh? And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned on you – where would you hide … the laws being flat… Yes, I'd give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake."

In a similar vein, the journalist Christopher Hitchens once said that "it doesn't matter *what* you think; it only matters *how* you think." I'm with him, and I'd add that the rules of logic and evidence that we use when coming to conclusions about right and wrong matter more than what our decision actually is on any particular point of morality. The reason that I think ethics (form) trump morals (substance) is simple enough. If you are careful to obey certain defensible conventions of reasoning, logic and fairness, to give due consideration to pertinent empirical verification, and to act with overall good faith when debating a moral question, you may very well come to a poor decision, but you will at least be open to reconsider the matter should others offer better proof (logic) or better proofs (evidence) at some future date. If, on the other hand, you come to a poor decision because of *how* you think (by relying, for example, on "faith" or an unfalsifiable authority), then chances are that you will be immune to further argument or indifferent when contrary information is put before you.

Two Problems with America

Applying these considerations to the United States of America, it is plain that one of its problems is that too many in its citizenry and their leadership tend to muddle ethics and morality. They conflate procedural rules and substantive judgement. And, worse in my

opinion, when they do make a proper distinction, they too often favour their moral prejudices over any account of due process and natural justice. This dilemma is compounded by the doctrine of "American exceptionalism," by which Americans very often view their society as being as near to perfect as human nature will allow, a "beacon of light" to those in darkness, a "shining city on the hill" providing a model for all other nations that wish to embrace liberty, prosperity and justice. Of course, these Americans often regard those who do not choose to emulate American culture as being ignorant of virtue, perversely opposed to progress and, if numerous and noisy enough, a threat to American security. Combined, a formidable obstacle is raised to all who dissent—domestically or globally. In the hands of a people who possess the greatest arsenal of nuclear, biochemical and conventional weaponry in the history of our species, what might be indulged as a sort of juvenile arrogance and occasional vandalism by less well organized and well-furnished missionaries of political salvation can, in the case of the United States (and any major empire past or future), also be a source of considerable and quite understandable worry.

Fortunately for those of us who live and work (most of the time) outside the United States, America's self-image as a generous benefactor of humanity is largely accurate. As individuals and in small groups, the American people have wonderful traits. At the risk of sounding disingenuous (or simply silly), I can truly say that many of my best friends are Americans, that I have enjoyed visiting their republic since my first visit to Buffalo NY in 1952, and that I have benefited immensely from living, studying and working there sporadically since 1961. At the same time, what Americans are like as individuals is not necessarily the same as what they are like collectively and institutionally. This, incidentally, is not a fact that is lost on many Americans; indeed, the country is to be commended for the accompanying fact that many of its most perceptive and courageous critics have been born and raised there and have matured to become its most genuinely patriotic citizens. So it is that Yale professor and political dissenter David Bromwich describes President Barack Obama, who is conventionally regarded as more openly cosmopolitan in his attitudes and demeanour than most of his predecessors, as nonetheless "captivated by an image of America as the world-historical touchstone of generous conduct toward other nations … [Obama's] self-assurance in speaking for patriotism innocent of selfishness," Bromwich continues, leads him to suppose "that a policy of national self-interest will prove identical with a policy of international nobility and self-sacrifice." Or, if I may rephrase an old American saying (often attributed to Calvin Coolidge): "What's good for America is good for the world."

The second problem with America concerns the insinuation of religious faith into its sense of political mission. In *Prodigal Nation*, Andrew R. Murphy, a political scientist at Rutgers University, charts the course of American history and its civic religion from the earliest Puritan settlements to the present day. He focuses on that strain of American culture that warns of "the end of days," that preaches the apocalypse and that speaks in sound and fury of the horrors of hellfire for those who do not embrace the Christian (or, rather, "their" Christian account of the fulfillment of God's plan on Earth. Incongruously, it is also the type of faith that can be used to recognize abominations such as slavery, liken them to the Egyptian bondage of the Jews, call upon God and man to

redress the evil and, interpreting the world providentially, fervently demand that the faithful remove such scourges from the people and the land, so that a new and righteous way of life might unfold. (A quick examination of the sentiments are expressed in words attributed to Jesus in the Gospels of *St. Matthew* 10:21 and *St. John* 10:10 will illustrate the nub of the problem.)

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So, President Obama's unceremoniously discarded religious mentor, the aptly named Jeremiah Wright and President Abraham Lincoln can be seen to share some elements of belief and rhetorical expression. Said Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address on 4 March, 1865:

> The Almighty has His own purposes. Let us suppose that American Slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came … [I]f God wills that … until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.

This is the tradition of the "weeping prophet," the jeremiad, and of millenarian messianism. Humanity (with or without the connivance of "Providence") brings evil upon itself through its own injustices; yet faith, hope and courage (with God's will) can redeem the past and bring the people to "the promised land," a higher state of spiritual (and often material) development.

The tradition craves prophets in the *Old Testament* style, yet it follows no steady narrative. Among its twentieth-century representatives are three-time presidential candidate, William Jennings Bryant, a populist and a defender of the "common man" as much as he was a foe of Darwin and evolution. There are also the likes of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, whose extremist views from the right-wing of American politics. The tradition links Cotton Mather to Glenn Beck, John Brown to Mary Baker Eddy, and Billy Graham to Jesse Jackson. The structure of the medium (the ethics of the jeremiad) is clearly more enduring than the substance of the message (the morals of reactionaries and progressives alike).

While it is possible to detect parallel phenomena in many other cultures, it is apparent that not only is the role of religion stronger in America than in any other modern liberal democracy, but it also seems internally inconsistent as well as incompatible with other

aspects of life in the United States. On the one hand, the religious tradition yields public figures and doctrines deeply divided between the right-wing appeal to the "old-time religion" and the left wing's earnest appeal for world peace and social justice. On the other hand, American religious commitments co-exist (albeit uncomfortably) with an economic and technological society at the pinnacle of material wealth (albeit somewhat shaken in recent years), a political empire (albeit one that is arguably on the tipping point of precipitous decline) and also the world's greatest (albeit probably temporary) source of scientific discovery and technological innovation. Most paradoxically, perhaps, the United States is the uncontested birthplace of "pragmatism" as both a philosophical and a practical guide to the always moderate good life.

To external observers, it is profoundly peculiar that the country founded by men like Ben Franklin (sensible to a fault) and the various "Deists" from the haughty George Washington to the self-absorbed genius, Thomas Jefferson, could have evolved over two-hundred-and-fifty years into a society in which both the nation's divine mission and the reconstructed religious beliefs of those very founders could now emerge as subjects of heated discussion and strident debate. There is much irony in the fact that men who worked so hard to build a wall between the public business and private belief should be succeeded by passionate politicians and political activists ever eager to violate the *First Amendment* to the *Constitution of the United States* and make laws "respecting an establishment of religion."

In thinking about the differences between men of commerce and statecraft in the late eighteenth-century and evangelical preachers seeking to drive the Devil out of political life in our own, it is of course easy to forget that matters of faith have never been consigned to the fringes of American public life. The breadth of the Christian influence bears emphasis. While the union of Christian fundamentalism and right-wing politics is ascendant today, it must not be forgotten that the much-cherished Rev. Martin Luther King as well as earlier reformers aligned with the "Social Gospel" and the still earlier abolitionists, made demands in the name of the Scriptures for racial equality and, in a few instances, something akin to democratic socialism. Walter Rauschenbusch's *Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917), for example, set out a left-wing agenda:

> The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind, the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine workship; the preservation of truth, the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

Rauschenbusch was a Baptist pastor who led a congregation in the neighbourhood of New York City known as "Hell's Kitchen." His moral critique of the selfishness and greed inherent in capitalism was joined with his practical support of trade union organization and co-operative economics. Although this avowedly leftist element is conspicuously missing from most contemporary American Christian tracts in which the wickedness of this world is brought to the fore, it should not be forgotten that even Rev. King grew from the single issue of racial discrimination to opposition to US imperial

adventurism in South-East Asia and finally, in the place where he died, to advocacy on behalf of trade union and working class causes.

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Aware of these incongruities, Murphy takes pains to report on the commonalities that link the call to restore the chosen people (for the prophet Jeremiah, the children of Israel; for American jeremiahs, the people of the United States) back to the path of righteousness from which they have allegedly strayed. This is not a new theme and it begs examination in a larger context.

The Definitive Act of Revolution

The American experience shares much with other examples of Christian evangelicalism and millenarianism, but it is also different. The thread that begins at Plymouth Rock connects to patterns of politics today, and the threat may have been frayed, but is unbroken. Given the immense social transformations in between, something more than a religious connection is implied. John Higham, in his presidential address to the Organization of American Historians in 1974, said that America's self-image and sense of community stems from a "primordial unity arising from place, kinship, ancestry, and other inherited relationships." This included "ideological unity based on individualist and libertarian values common to dissenting Protestantism and Enlightenment political thought that sanctioned the American Revolution. While religion, *per se*, was endemic to American self-consciousness, it combined with a sudden and definitive political event, the American Revolution. So, Clinton Rossiter made the case that this signal event of American history, the War of Independence from the United Kingdom, presented American citizens with an enormous psychological problem. To engage in a successful revolution is not unlike undergoing a religious conversion. The past must be abandoned; personal and political identity must be freshly constructed on ideals of sufficient mythological power to warrant acceptance of a new social order. Loyalty to that order becomes an essential element of public discourse. Disloyalty begets procedural exclusion or physical expulsion (the United Empire Loyalists did not trek north to Canada because they fancied a change of scene and weather).

The United States, therefore, became an exclusivist nation. It championed an "American Way of Life." It conflated procedural and evaluative norms. The conflation was exemplified by the creation of House Committee on Un-American Activities (1938-1975) which implied that anyone who did not concur with the moral tenets associated with the American myth-dream could also be denied the constitutional protection of due process of law. *The Patriot Act* (2001) and associated anti-terrorist regulations and measures made explicit what previous ideologically based processes usually left implicit, namely that the principal ethical tenets of the "American Way of Life" as embodied in the first

ten Amendments to the *Constitution* could and would, in Gore Vidal's telling phrase, wither as the US government undertook "shredding the Bill of Rights" if the moral demands of the day required it.

As David L. Kling of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Miami makes clear, the jeremiad "is a well-known genre of Puritan sermonizing, but it is also a fixture in the history of American political discourse. … [It] bemoans the people's unfaithfulness to the covenant and implores them to repent and return to the virtuous ways of the founding generation." Whether that founding generation be the Pilgrim Fathers or the Founding Fathers (and it is unclear of some of the most vociferous "bemoaners" can tell the difference, or if the difference matters for practical purposes), the key element is the "covenant," a moral commitment more than a matter of procedural niceties.

United at its base by a revolutionary covenant that matches the religious covenant with the "Judaeo-Christian" God, the United States permits differences of opinion about particular policies, but is less generous about fundamental ideological commitments. That ideology, of course, is liberalism (the myth of progress, individualism and a free market economy) intertwined with the mainly Protestant theology and morality. The mixture can be said to constitute the American civil religion. It is a powerful combination which was once described by the conservative Canadian philosopher George Grant as "the ideology of the American system and … an effective gelding knife against opposition." This may seem odd, especially to those Americans who imagine themselves to be "conservatives," until it is recognized that the American political debate is really about classical 18th-century liberalism emanating from the natural rights theories of John Locke and the classical economists (narrowly understood) and reformist 20th-century liberalism which seeks to balance property rights with a measure of social assistance. Both, however, endorse the principle of freedom over obligation, individualism over collectivism and competition over cooperation as a method of sorting out justifiable rewards; thus any discord between equality and equity is removed.

The Two Sides of the American Civic Religion

Andrew Murphy has done a good job of treating one-half of American religio-political ideology. In stressing the role of religion in public life, he traces the jeremiad tradition from its English Calvinist origins to its later internally conflicted expressions. In the hands of reformers such as Dr. King, it appeared as a Christian gospel of tolerance, solidarity and charity. In the grasp of politicians such as Sharron Angle, who appears to embrace the "Christian Reconstructionist" philosophy begun by Rousas John Rushdoony and now claims over twenty million supporters, there is a growing dedication to something only a little short of a new American Revolution. The aim is to rid the country of the influence of those deemed to have betrayed the Founding Fathers. Finding inspiration in their distinctive readings of *The Holy Bible*, and in the equally sacred *Constitution of the United States*, their principal theorist, Gary North, says that "the long-term goal of Christians in politics should be to gain exclusive control over the franchise … [and that] those who refuse to submit publicly…must be denied citizenship" (North,

1988, p. 87). Likewise, Tea Party founder Ron Paul calls for a restoration of the libertarian individualism that he takes to be the core American political doctrine (2011).

For the reformers, intolerance and avarice amount to an injustice that is inconsistent with the moral code which both the Christian religion and the American republic's promise. For the reactionaries, socialism, relativism and multiculturalism amount to infidelity to the original intent of their faith and the founders of their nation. The influence of Christian reformers seems at a low ebb, while the tide their competitors is rising. So it is the louder call is upon "real" Americans to worship with evangelical preachers, attend to the messages of broadcasting figures from Glenn Beck to Rush Limbaugh, and support political candidates whose invocation of a religious patriotism is positioned against the creeping socialism, crawling secularism and what is rather hilariously called "Marxism" of Public Broadcasting System viewers, public library patrons and consumers of public utilities such as municipal parking facilities.

Even without the political side of this coin, the religious tradition remains an important area of American Studies. Of special interest is the internal debate between the softer values of compassion and tolerance on the one hand, and rigidity and hostility on the other. It is this aspect that Murphy has helped render comprehensible.

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>
> – George Grant

Within the political side, the religious tradition helps explain why many Americans think and act as they do in public affairs. The religious commitments of both political leaders and their sensitivities to those of their more passionate constituents help define their approaches to local, national and global problems. They are significant factors that need to be taken into account when Americans become engaged in multilateral programs, international negotiations or efforts to establish common approaches to international criminal law, disaster relief, intellectual property agreements, pollution standards and conventions, free trade rules and enforcement, labour and environmental regulations and the definition and deterrance of war crimes. No matter how practical, technical and down-to-earth a subject might be (e.g., international weights and measures) or how infused with inherent moral controversy (e.g., women's rights), it is necessary to take seriously the cultural background of the discussants and the implications of that background for the framing of discussion. If nothing else, as one observer mused, "there's no such thing as an atheist candidate in an American election." The paradox of the United States, which has been both most important source of scientific and technological knowledge and the domain of the most fervent Christian fundamentalists in the world is one that cannot be ignored.

When we consider that the country is rife with opinion leaders such as Pastor John Hagee, whose recent book, *Can America Survive?* (2010) speaks feverishly of the "coming of the Anti-Christ," the impending approach of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and the looming "day of disaster"; when we hear him thunder his message to

what he calls "the terminal generation," and ask his parishioners and says to his vast television and radio audience, "Are we ready?"; and when we take note that he and his fellow televangelist Rod Parsely have over 30,000 members in their local churches and are heard by a combined TV and radio weekly following of over 100 million listeners, there is little comfort to be won and little understanding to be gained by shrugging off this dimension of American culture and political life.

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