

Religious Myths and Visions of America

How Minority Faiths Redefined
America's World Role

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CHAPTER 12

Conclusion: How Minority Faiths Redefined America's World Role

Religious institutions play only a modest, indirect role in the development and implementation of foreign policy. But as moral teachers and the bearers of ethical traditions, religious communities can help to structure debate and illuminate relevant moral norms. They can help to develop and sustain political morality by promoting moral reasoning and by exemplifying values and behaviors that are conducive to human dignity.

—Mark R. Amstutz (2001)¹

The very notion that America has a world role has its roots in American exceptionalism. Journalist Michael Barone captured the logic of U.S. exceptionalism when he opened his article in the *U.S. News and World Report's* June 2004 special issue, *Defining America: Why the U.S. Is Unique*, with this oft-quoted line: “Every nation is unique, but America is the most unique.”² Throughout American history and in recent world affairs, American exceptionalism—“the perception that the United States differs qualitatively from other developed nations, because of its unique origins, national credo, historical evolution, and distinctive political and religious institutions”³—has been a powerful myth indeed. It has functioned as a national creed. How that myth arose in the first place has much to do with the religious origins of America, beginning with the Puritans. How the myth of American exceptionalism has been defined—and will continue to be *redefined*—must also include the role of religious influences on competing social myths of American nationalism and nationhood. Not until the twentieth century,

however, was the myth of American exceptionalism sufficient to define a world role for America beyond exemplarism and “democracy promotion.”

It was President Woodrow Wilson—awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1919—who is almost universally recognized as having first defined America’s world role geopolitically. “Woodrow Wilson . . . can be credited with having been the first to transform American exceptionalism into a universal public good,” writes Edward Kolodziej, “to be enjoyed by all peoples as an outright gift of the American public and to harness American military and economic power to these global objectives of American-dictated world order.”⁴ On January 8, 1918, before a joint session of Congress, President Wilson formulated his celebrated “Fourteen Points” for a post–World War I settlement and the establishment of a stable world order. The fourteenth point of Wilson’s visionary proposal called for the formation of a League of Nations: “A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.”⁵ In 1919, however, Congress refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, despite an impassioned plea by President Wilson who invoked “the hand of God” at work in the creation of a League of Nations:

It is thus that a new role and a new responsibility have come to this great Nation that we honor and which we would all wish to lift to yet higher levels of service and achievement. The stage is set, the destiny disclosed. It has come about by no plan of our conceiving, but by the hand of God, who led us into this way. It was of this that we dreamed at our birth. America shall in truth show the way. The light streams upon the path ahead, and nowhere else.⁶

Of the Treaty’s 440 articles, the first 26 set forth the Covenant of the League of Nations. Wilson’s plea for the United States to join the League of Nations, however, simply could not overcome the isolationism and narrowing nationalism of his day. Although Wilsonian internationalism has been seen as essentially nationalist by at least one major Wilson biographer,⁷ President Wilson was arguably ahead of his time. In 1919, there was little by way of *religious* consensus in support of Wilson’s personal vision. Later in the twentieth century, however, religious influence in favor of America’s world role began to be felt.

As the twentieth century progressed, there was increasing receptivity to the idea that America ought to play a greater role in international affairs—indeed, that America was destined for it, as the global spread of fundamental American values could be instrumental in shaping an emerging world order. In this sense, American internationalism could be thought of as *American exceptionalism universalized*. The time was right. Indeed, the twentieth century was

famously described as the “American Century” in 1941 by *Time* magazine publisher Henry Luce, who wrote:

AMERICA'S VISION OF OUR WORLD

What can we say and foresee about an American Century? . . . [W]hat internationalism have we Americans to offer? . . . It must be a sharing with all peoples of our Bill of Rights, our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, our magnificent industrial products, our technical skills. It must be an internationalism of the people, by the people and for the people.⁸

There is no religious rhetoric here. But the vision of America's world role is expressed with religious conviction.

While religious influences have not had a direct impact on U.S. foreign policy subsequent to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny,⁹ religious perspectives have played a part in what Donald White calls “consensus beliefs” and the American “consensus perception of world affairs.” White notes the transformative power of a public sense of American national identity: “The origin of the American role in the world was dependent not only on material elements *but also on intangibles.*”¹⁰ White credits the emergence of a belief in America's world role to the power of public consensus: “The United States began its world role because of a consensus in the society over internationalism.”¹¹ White further explains:

The emergence of the world role of the United States in the twentieth century depended on the will of the people. The conversion to an international outlook among the leaders of government and society became accepted by the mass of people of different occupations, home towns, political parties, religions, ethnic groups, and races, who, though divided by their separate interests, adopted *unifying concepts* to bring them together in a collective worldview.¹²

What about the twenty-first century? Can minority faiths collectively provide intangible yet persuasive “consensus beliefs” regarding America's world role? To address this question, a review of the dynamics of religious visions—favored truths animated by the power of religious myths—is instructive. Religious myths and visions of America are essentially *unifying concepts* among the adherents of their respective faith-communities. As such, one can say that the essence of this book can be summed up in three words: *Religions remythologize America*. This summation would be more complete with these three additional words: *Religions re-envision America*. Put together, this book demonstrates that *religions remythologize and re-envision America*.

Here, the *way* in which religions remythologize and re-envision America requires further explanation. First, the reader will recall that “America” is a

figment of the nationalistic imagination in that America is, at once, *nation and notion, country and creed, entity and ideology*. Thus the “idea of America,” when religiously inspired, can give rise to a progressive religious nationalism that enriches American civil religion. To oversimplify, this is *Puritanism pluralized*.

However, all is not so bright and rosy in the mythic realm, insofar as America is concerned. Because of this historical and long-standing racial injustice, there are starkly pejorative visions of America as well. In the Nation of Islam, for instance, religious myths and visions of America are dark and foreboding, even catastrophic in outlook. Elijah Muhammad’s and Louis Farrakhan’s visions of the destruction of America—in an apocalyptic attack by the “Mother Wheel”—are menacing and chilling, not so much for their content as in the fact that people actually believe in the reality of these myths. Surprisingly, these scenarios have taken grip of the minds of not a few Black Muslims, who honestly *believe* these myths. (The present writer has personally met such individuals in Decatur and Springfield, Illinois, from 1997 to 2000.) In other words, these myths have imaginative reality. As a “true lie,” the Mother Wheel myth may be understood and appreciated as a clarion call for America to make a renewed effort to promote racial justice and reconciliation in order to avert the further decay of American society.

This process of remythologizing is in evidence when racial and ethnic notions are brought into play. This study has shown that myths and visions of America can have a decidedly ethnic and racially referenced dimension. For instance, in Chapter 3, American exceptionalism was shown to have largely been the product of Anglo-Saxon ethnogenesis.¹³ In other words, the greatness of America, expressed universally—under its nineteenth-century Protestant formulation—was a coded expression of Anglo-Saxon hubris, which, by virtue of the vaunted superiority of the White race, was decidedly exclusive. This overweening ethnonationalism represented a nativist expression of the dominant ethnicity.¹⁴ This should come as no surprise really, for it is quite natural (although, by today’s standards, not desirable) when one considers the relationship between ethnicities and nations, as Eric Kaufmann observes: “The nations of the world, almost without exception, were formed from ethnic cores, whose pre-modern myth–symbol complex furnished the material for the construction of the modern nation’s boundary symbols and civil religion.”¹⁵ If nations—or, more precisely, nationalisms—were originally ethnic *constructions*, then it stands to reason that the *reconstruction* of nationalisms can be a function of subsequent multiethnic social realities.

From a certain perspective, racism in America can be seen as a historical consequence of privileging the Anglo-Saxon or White race as divinely destined to prosecute the Protestant mission to *conquer, colonize, and Christianize* the entire continent of North America, under the imperialist doctrine of

Manifest Destiny. While Manifest Destiny was, at one time, the prevailing vision of America as far as domestic and foreign policy was concerned, Manifest Destiny has since been discredited and is of historical interest only.

The subsequent history of the religious idea of America, therefore, can be analyzed, in part, as an evolution—protracted and painful—in the idea of the place of race and ethnicity in American life, *as religiously valued*. The evolution of American thought, with respect to the idea of America itself, is roughly a progression from religious—and often racial—particularism to universal inclusivism. That is to say, the religious idea of America represents a transformation of Protestant ethnoreligious homogeneity to multiethnic and multireligious plurality, reflecting a direct, albeit delayed and long-overdue, response to America's changing demography and religious landscape. Religious myths of America—true to changed historical circumstances and social dynamics—eventually give way to new myths and visions of America. The process of remythologizing therefore reflects progress in the social evolution of America.

This social evolution, in terms of the broadening mind-set it directionally represents, remains as incomplete as it is perhaps inevitable. To the extent that America succeeds, in time, in overcoming racial limitations will America's world role become a morally authentic enterprise. In that world microcosm and social laboratory known as "America," such a transformation of the American ideal is arguably a major consequence of the influence of minority faiths. The end result is the deconstruction of the Puritan and Anglo-Saxon sense of divine election, but without devaluing the essential mission of America to become a "city upon a hill"—that is, as an exemplary society that may serve as a social model for other societies to emulate.

Religions remythologize America to the degree that the old myths are rendered obsolete when new myths of America take their place. Generally speaking, one can say that, over time, religious myths and visions of America are largely products of their respective times and places. Within a given religious tradition, there will be change over time, in what Americanists regard as the evolution of American thought. These new myths, therefore, conform to new modes of thinking and valuation as a function of the evolution of American thought.

RELIGIOUS MYTHS AND VISIONS OF AMERICA RECAPITULATED

If lessons are to be drawn from American history and thought, then what significance, it may be asked, do religious myths and visions of America have for Americans today? Recall that historian James Moorhead had suggested that the Protestant myth of America—America's master myth—has been reshaped by minority faiths: "But the point is that minority faiths themselves

played no small part in the weakening of white Protestant hegemony. Their creativity in adapting and reinterpreting the symbols of American destiny broadened the framework of discourse within which citizens explained national identity.”¹⁶ Within this wider framework of discourse, new religious voices are heard and fresh perspectives are gained. In one sense, the wider framework of discourse of which Moorhead speaks implicates the end result: a universalizing of America’s founding principles of equality and egalitarianism, as applied to all of America’s constituents.

Of primary interest in this book has been America’s “world role.” By “world role,” as previously stated, is simply meant *the part that America should play in world affairs*. It is time to bring America’s world role, from the perspective of minority faiths, into sharper focus, and, perhaps, to take the “latest and greatest” expressions of those perspectives as exemplary. As the times change, so do religions. Therefore, this concluding chapter will recapitulate the more recent visions of America’s world role, as respectively held by the minority faiths treated in the preceding pages, with reference also to contemporary Protestant visions of America.

Native American Myths and Visions of America

The original myths and visions of America were from Native Americans themselves, as exemplified by the Iroquois version of the Turtle Island Myth and by the pan-Indian Myth of “Mother Earth.” Thus it is clear that religious myths and visions of America have existed ever since the colonial period and, in the case of the Iroquois myth of “Turtle Island,” in the precontact period as well. The pan-Native American myth of Mother Earth, in fact, is a somewhat later development, and there is a very real sense in which the Mother Earth myth actually remythologizes the Turtle Island myth by transforming it from a nature-referenced narrative into a more environmentally value-laden perspective. Both myths are nature-based, to be sure, but the Mother Earth myth is more ecologically conscious because it was promoted and popularized as such in the course of its development.

As we are now in the “age of ecology,” the “Turtle Island” myth itself is currently one of the great cultural symbols of nature-conscious environmentalism, as is the myth of “Mother Earth.” These symbols have been absorbed by American popular culture quite apart from the original Native American context. Both “Turtle Island” and “Mother Earth” are ways of sacralizing (making sacred) the physical environment, or promoting a nature-inclusive spirituality. Because these nature myths have been so successfully and ubiquitously popularized, they now play a conceptual and symbolic role in “greening” other religions in order to promote respect for the environment and inculcate environmentally beneficent behaviors among their adherents.

This process has been called the “greening-of-religions phenomenon”¹⁷ and the infusing of “environmental ethics” into traditional religious worldviews.¹⁸ As one illustrative example of the renewed cross-cultural identification of “Turtle Island” with North America, consider poet Gary Snyder’s reworking of the America’s “Pledge of Allegiance”:

I pledge allegiance to the soil of Turtle Island, and to the beings who thereon dwell one ecosystem in diversity under the sun With joyful interpenetration for all.¹⁹

In 1975, Snyder’s 1974 collection of poems, *Turtle Island*, won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1975. The assimilation of the myth (or at least the concept) of Turtle Island (as well as Mother Earth) is a testament to the revitalization and contemporary relevance of a Native American religious myth. Extrapolating from this myth, one can say that, from a Native American religious perspective, America’s world role is to promote environmental ethics and ecological sustainability.

The Iroquois Confederacy is generally acknowledged as the first New World democracy. Given this priority in time, the Iroquois myth (or, because of its acknowledged historicity, the “legend”) of Deganawidah may have had some influence on the shaping of the American republic, although this remains controversial, as the Iroquois Influence Thesis continues to be debated. Is it myth or history? The answers, either way, continue to be hotly contested. Notwithstanding, the reader will recall that, on October 4, 1988, the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.Con.Res. 331—*A concurrent resolution to acknowledge the contribution of the Iroquois Confederacy of Nations to the development of the United States Constitution and to reaffirm the continuing government-to-government relationship between Indian tribes and the United States established in the Constitution*—by a vote of 408–8. By voice vote, the Senate agreed to H.Con.Res. 331 on October 21, 1988. That Congressional resolution reads, in part:

Whereas the original framers of the Constitution, including, most notably, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, are known to have greatly admired the concepts of the six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy; Whereas, the Confederation of the original Thirteen Colonies into one republic was influenced by the political system developed by the Iroquois Confederacy as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the Constitution itself; . . . *Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring)*, That—(1) the Congress, on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the signing of the United States Constitution, acknowledges contribution made by the Iroquois Confederacy and other Indian Nations to the formation and development of the United States.²⁰

The reader will also recall that, in 2007, U.S. Representative Joe Baca and U.S. Senator Daniel Inouye, respectively, introduced H.R. 3585 and S. 1852 to the House and Senate, to wit: *Native American Heritage Day Act of 2007*, “A bill to designate the Friday after Thanksgiving of each year as ‘Native American Heritage Day’ in honor of the achievements and contributions of Native Americans to the United States.” This proposed legislation, in its current draft, acknowledges the contribution of the Iroquois League of Nations. This draft resolution reads, in part: “Congress finds that . . . the Founding Fathers based the provisions of the Constitution on the unique system of democracy of the six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, which divided powers among the branches of government and provided for a system of checks and balances.”²¹ Here, it can definitely be said that “the mystique of Iroquois unity and power had taken on a life of its own.”²² That the Iroquois influence myth has indeed taken on a life of its own, as the Congressional resolution clearly illustrates, is noted by one scholar so: “Despite the highly speculative nature of the evidence, this misconception has become a shibboleth, one which has been given even the official imprimatur of the United States Senate (United States Congress, Senate Resolution No. 76 [Washington, D.C.: U.S.G.P.O., 1988]).”²³ From this, it can be extrapolated that the Iroquois vision of America is the promotion of the democratic way of life worldwide, in the interests of peace.

Protestant Myths and Visions of America

Today, there are largely liberal expressions of Protestant Christianity that seek to apply Christian principles to the social problems of the day. The idea that Protestant ethics, as it were, can be usefully implemented to improve social conditions can certainly be traced back to the Puritan origins of present-day America. As presented in Chapter 3, the Puritans established what has come to be regarded as the foundational myth of America. Their vision generated the greater—and perhaps grander—Protestant master myth of America: “The Puritans provided the scriptural basis for what we have come to call the myth of America.”²⁴ Mimicking the style of the prologue of the Gospel of John, the famed Americanist Sacvan Bercovitch characterizes the Puritan myth of America so: “*In the beginning was the word, ‘America,’ and the word was in the Bible, and the word was made flesh in the Americans, this new breed of humans, destined to build a shining city upon a hill.*”²⁵ Here, Bercovitch’s reference to “city upon a hill” alludes to the first definitive Puritan discourse on America, “A Modell of Christian Charity” (1630), which is John Winthrop’s speech to his fellow Puritans aboard the *Arbella*, on its voyage across the Atlantic to the Massachusetts coast. This homily was destined to become one of the most powerful,

pervasive, and persistent visions of America—the doctrine of American exceptionalism.

Generally, American exceptionalism sees America as a favored nation with a world mission. The Puritans were the first exponents of American exceptionalism. This Puritan myth has five key ideographs: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire.²⁶ These are *civic* American values. There are also *religious* American values, as expressed in ideographs that represent myths. Perhaps the best example of this is John Winthrop's celebrated ideograph: "Wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the Eies of all people are upon us."²⁷ Thus, in 1630, the Puritans constructed a national identity out of their own sense of uniqueness—that is, the Puritans aspired to establish a model society that would serve as a moral exemplar for the world to emulate. Thus, with respect to the Puritan Myth of America, it can be inferred that America's "world role" (although not expressed in those terms), was to be an exemplar society for all the world to behold, admire, and emulate.

For the vanquished, at least, the "Manifest Destiny" Myth was a perversion of the Puritan Myth of America. While some may say that Manifest Destiny is now disguised as hegemonic interests by the world's only superpower, it has long since been discredited. And while the legacy of "Jim Crow" racism persists in socially subtler forms, the "Curse of Ham" Myth has fallen by the wayside as a discarded myth as well. America's social sea change from Protestantism to pluralism and from racialism to interracialism, although demographically uneven and institutionally incomplete, was greatly catalyzed by the civil rights movement, which had social implications not only for America but also for the world. The social significance of the civil rights movement for the world at large was best articulated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his prophetic vision of "The World House":

This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace. . . . The large house in which we live demands that we transform this world-wide neighborhood into a world-wide brotherhood.²⁸

While Dr. King's promotion of a "world-wide brotherhood" within the "World House" is not representative, much less central, to Protestantism in America generally, it remains as arguably the most prophetic Protestant vision of America. Complementing this world-encompassing vision is America's mission at home: "King believed that the mission of American Protestantism was not merely to make Christians of all Americans, but to

Christianize America.”²⁹ Perhaps this reading of King is too narrow, in that King’s metaphor of the “World House” is a panoramic vision of interfaith ecumenism.

One of the latest reformulations of Puritan providentialism is Stephen H. Webb’s 2004 book, *American Providence: A Nation with a Mission*.³⁰ *American Providence* is arguably the finest “theology of America” published in recent years. Webb, professor of religion and philosophy at Wabash College, argues that all of history—and the history of each and every nation—should be interpreted providentially. Regarding America itself, Webb holds that God has chosen America, above and beyond all other nations, for a special mission: to complete the Great Commission (spread of the message of Christ throughout the world) by promoting political freedom (that is, the freedom of religion whereby people can freely become Christians) and evangelical Christianity. It is not America *per se* that is intrinsically significant, but its capacity to incarnate Christian virtues within a social order: “The significance of America has to do with what it believes in, not what it is. America is the dream that faith and freedom can be mutually reinforcing within a given social order.”³¹ Although America has a providential mission and destiny, it is Webb’s conviction that Christianity has an even greater destiny in that it will emerge as the world religion of the future: “The destiny of Christianity, however, is much greater than the destiny of America. . . . Christians believe only one globalism will triumph in the end—and that it will be a globalism of the one true God.”³²

Catholic Myths and Visions of America

Although the Americanist Myth of America was put to an abrupt end by Pope Leo XIII, its legacy continues—not as infallible Catholic doctrine promulgated *ex cathedra*—but as edifying papal *dicta*. Recall that, on April 17, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI said to America:

Today, in classrooms throughout the country, young Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and indeed children of all religions sit side-by-side, learning with one another and from one another. This diversity gives rise to new challenges that spark a deeper reflection on the core principles of a democratic society. May others take heart from your experience, realizing that a united society can indeed arise from a plurality of peoples—“*E pluribus unum*”: “out of many, one”—provided that all recognize religious liberty as a basic civil right.³³

Here, Pope Benedict XVI has charged America with the task of promoting “religious liberty as a basic civil right,” in the hope that other nations will be inspired by the American model and establish freedom of religion in their own respective societies.

The reader will also recall how, on January 27, 2004, Pope John Paul II received Vice President Dick Cheney, who represented President George W. Bush, and said to him:

Mr. Vice President, . . . I encourage you and your fellow-citizens to work, at home and abroad, *for the growth of international cooperation and solidarity in the service of that peace which is the deepest aspiration of all men and women.* Upon you and all the American people I cordially invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.³⁴

No more explicit mandate could be given to America. In a word, America's world role is to promote Catholic values and principles of social justice, at home and abroad.

Jewish Myths and Visions of America

One of the significant findings of this book is that American Judaism, generally speaking, has fully embraced American values. What Jonathan Sarna calls the "cult of synthesis" might be more positively characterized as a "grand synthesis" of American Judaism and Americanism. Having reviewed the Jewish myth of America as "The Promised Land" and the Jewish "Myth of Columbus" as well, the reader will appreciate how Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Judaism's respective myths and visions of America express elements of "Jewish Americanism" as part of a social phenomenon that Jonathan Sarna calls the "Cult of Synthesis."³⁵ In a very real and practical sense, Jewish Americanism functioned as an ideal survival strategy. Adoption of American values and the enjoyment of protection under the American system of fundamental rights and civil liberties had its advantages, not only for American Judaism at large, but for distinct communities within American Judaism. The American tradition of religious freedom operates to safeguard religious pluralism within American Judaism itself.

Take Reform Judaism, for instance. Founded in 1889, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) is the organized rabbinate (body of rabbis) for Reform Jews in America. In a December 1988 *responsa*, the CCAR declared: "We must now deal with this new state of affairs and support unity and pluralism."³⁶ While this is in reference to the divisions within Judaism itself, the principle doubtless generalizes to society as a whole. The reader will recall that the term, "cultural pluralism"—which, of course, adumbrates religious pluralism—was coined by Jewish philosopher Horace Kallen, in conversation with Alain Locke (first African American Rhodes Scholar, "Dean of the Harlem Renaissance," and "Bahá'í philosopher") at Oxford

University in 1907. Pluralism maintains the continued viability of Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Judaism within America, and has been offered as a model for the State of Israel to emulate.

As for America's world role, this is perhaps best expressed in the Jewish prayer for America, composed by Louis Ginzberg:

May this land, under your providence, be an influence for good throughout the world, uniting all people in peace and freedom—helping them to fulfill the vision of your prophet: “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they experience war any more” (Isaiah 2:4). And let us say: Amen.³⁷

Here is a call for America and its people to promote “peace and freedom” throughout the world, in order to make Isaiah's future vision a present reality.

Mormon Myths and Visions of America

Of the minority faiths treated in this book, Mormonism arguably has the richest array of America-centered myths. Chapter 6 treated the Mormon Garden of Eden Myth, the Lost Tribes Myth, the Columbus Myth, the Constitution Myth, the Founding Fathers Myth, the Theodemocracy Myth, the America as Zion Myth, and the Mark of Cain Myth. The Garden of Eden was not in the Euphrates Valley of the Old World, but rather in the Mississippi Valley of the New World. From prehistory to modern history, Mormon scriptures present an exalted vision of America. “And for this purpose have I established the Constitution of this land,” states the Book of Mormon, “by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose,”³⁸ in reference to America's Founding Fathers. This short prayer for America is scriptural: “Have mercy, O Lord, upon all the nations of the earth; have mercy upon the rulers of our land; may those principles, which were so honorably and nobly defended, namely, the Constitution of our land, by our fathers, be established forever.”³⁹ Of these, the Theodemocracy Myth is the one most directly concerned with good governance. Taken together, these Mormon myths synthesize and mythologize distinctively American values, within a complex of equally distinctive Mormon values. These myths are not relics; they are alive and well. The Mark of Cain Myth, however, has been abandoned, although not officially repudiated.

America remains an exalted place, a chosen nation, in the Mormon worldview. As “the land of promise,”⁴⁰ America has been “lifted up by the power of God above all other nations, upon the face of the land which is choice above all other lands.”⁴¹ Indeed, Brigham Young envisioned America's place in the future golden age to come: “When the day comes in which the Kingdom of God will bear rule, the flag of the United States will proudly flutter

unsullied on the flagstaff of liberty and equal rights, without a spot to sully its fair surface.”⁴² This, generally, may be seen as America's world role, in Brigham Young's conception of it, to promote “liberty and equal rights.”

Christian Identity Myths and Visions of America

The Christian Identity movement is the name attached to what may be described as White nationalism's collective theology, as promoted by a loosely organized network of white supremacist groups whose presence is primarily maintained in cyberspace on various Internet sites. In Chapter 7, the Two-Seed Myth, the Mud Races Myth, the Lost Tribes Myth, the White Homeland Myth, and the Racial Holy War Myth were presented. In “The Role of Religion in the Collective Identity of the White Racist Movement,” Iowa State University sociologist Betty A. Dobratz observes that, because the White supremacist movement actually has three competing religions—Christian Identity, the World Church of the Creator (anti-Christian), and neo-pagan Odinism—there is no definitive religious expression of that movement. “Religion could be a crucial ingredient in a group's identity when the group shares a distinctive religion,” Dobratz writes. “However, in this movement, various religious beliefs are competing, and no one common belief has emerged.”⁴³ In other words, Christian Identity myths, while distinctive, are not necessarily definitive. To the extent that the Christian Identity movement can be said to have a unified vision of America, it follows that America's “world role,” if any, is to preserve the purity of the White race and to establish a Whites-only homeland. In its failure to dissociate Whiteness from Christianity, Christian Identity represents the extreme of religio-racial mythologizing, in the very antithesis of Christian universalism.

Black Muslim Myths and Visions of America

Like the Mark of Cain Myth in Mormonism, the Yacub Myth, the Mother Plane Myth, and the Destruction of America Myth have largely been abandoned, although not repudiated. The Nation of Islam, predicated on Black nationalism, formerly entailed what is fair to characterize as “religious racism.” But times are changing, and, over the course of the past three and a half decades, Louis Farrakhan has changed considerably himself.

In his 1993 chapter, “A Vision for America,” Louis Farrakhan proclaimed that America, although not the land of promise for African Americans, had the potential to become so: “The Kingdom of God is an egalitarian kingdom structured on truth, where each of us will be treated with fairness and justice. America could become the basis for the Kingdom of God.”⁴⁴ America, although a professedly Christian country, has “missed the message of Christ,

or has yet to receive His true message.”⁴⁵ This can be achieved, according to Farrakhan, by “righteousness, justice and peace,” which, when practiced, can “form the basis of the Kingdom of God on earth.”⁴⁶ However “egalitarian” this message may sound, however, there is a catch. In 2007, in an interview with *The Final Call* newspaper (an official Nation of Islam publication), Farrakhan was asked:

After Saviours’ Day 2007, you delivered a series of spiritual messages under the general title of “One Nation Under God,” culminating with your message “Come Out of Her, My People” delivered at the 12th Anniversary Commemoration of the Million Man March on Oct. 16, 2007 in Atlanta, Ga. What is your statement to Black America about the significance and prophetic meaning of these messages for our survival?

Farrakhan’s answer, although surprising at first to outsiders, should ultimately come as no surprise, given his long-standing patterns of thinking:

Allah (God) knows that we need prayer, but if we don’t separate from an enemy bent on our destruction, prayer alone will not help us to survive. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad points out to us in the scriptures of Bible and Qur’an that the day has arrived for our separation, and the enemy has used integration as a hypocritical trick to make those of us who have been under his foot for 400 years think that our 400-year-old enemy has all of a sudden become our friend. We must wake up to the time and what must be done in such a time. *It is not a time for integration; it is a time for us to separate from our former slave-masters and their children and go for self, do for self, and build a Nation under the Guidance of Almighty God.*⁴⁷

Farrakhan maintains “there can be no peace between us and our former slave masters and their children as long as we do not go along with the status quo. When we demand Justice, Freedom and Equity, we excite the worst in our slave masters and their children.”⁴⁸ Speaking of recent hate crimes committed in 2007 “throughout America by evil White people bent on teaching us a lesson,” Farrakhan warns: “We must unite or suffer the consequences, for these events are going to multiply at such a pace that every Black person in America will see the face of a beast that has been masquerading as a friend.”⁴⁹ To make matters worse, Farrakhan still adheres to a Jewish conspiracy theory. In the same 2007 interview, Farrakhan said that “the Zionists have worked their way into control in America, Britain, France, Germany and other countries of the world.”⁵⁰ As for America itself, in 2007 Farrakhan predicted, in his “absence” (presumably after his death) “you see the horrors of the fall of this Great Mystery Babylon—the United States of America.”⁵¹ Farrakhan, and therefore the Nation of Islam that is still under his shadow,

holds a deeply conflicted vision of America, inauthentically promulgated in the name of the religion of Islam—to the extent that religious racism devalues the polished rhetoric of faith-based egalitarianism.

Contemporary Muslim Myths and Visions of America

Before all else, it is important to point out that there is no single Muslim perspective on America. Notwithstanding this fact, America receives considerable criticism from abroad, as the “Great Satan” Myth amply demonstrates. That myth was answered by the opposite and equal “Axis of Evil” counter-myth. In other words, the arrow quickly flew back at the archer, so to speak. The result is reciprocal demonization. Quite expectedly, the Great Satan Myth has created problems for Muslims in America. Is an American Muslim somehow “satanic” by virtue of being a citizen of the “Great Satan”? Reciprocally, are Americans to understand that Islam, as understood in the contemporary Muslim world, intrinsically anti-America? The answer to both rhetorical questions is obviously negative. However, largely as a consequence of American foreign policy considerations, American Muslims are as conflicted about America as they are diverse with respect to their range of “responses to modernity,” as discussed in Chapter 9. By no stretch of the imagination does Radical Islamism represent mainstream Islam. Yet one would hardly reach this conclusion if based on what the popular media represents.

As the “Great Satan,” America has no positive world role from the Radical Islamist perspective. While the “Axis of Evil” counter-myth does imbue America with a world role in promoting democracy and freedom in the Middle East and around the world, this vision arises out of a context completely foreign to the Muslim world. Efforts to dispel the “Great Satan” Myth and to minimize the fallout from the “Axis of Evil” Myth are focused primarily on the issue of whether America is anti-Islamic or pro-Islamic. As such, America has no positive role even from a moderate Islamic perspective. Might America have a world role from the perspective of “Progressive Islam”?

The most vocal proponent of Progressive Islam is Omid Safi, associate professor of Islamic Studies and Director of Middle East and Islamic Studies at Colgate University, in Hamilton, New York. Co-chair for the Study of Islam Section at the American Academy of Religion, Dr. Safi has edited the 2003 multiauthor work, *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*.⁵² Progressive Islam is defined, in part, as follows:

Progressive Muslims espouse a critical and non-apologetic “multiple critique” with respect to both Islam and modernity. They are undoubtedly postmodern in

the sense of their critical approach to modernity. That double engagement with the varieties of Islam and modernity, plus an emphasis on concrete social action and transformation, is the defining characteristic of progressive Islam today.⁵³

As for Safi and the Progressive Muslim movement, there has been some debate about the group in its blurring the line between academic and confessional.⁵⁴ Does Safi represent the voices of academics or of “Progressive Muslims” themselves?

“Progressive *ijtihad* (reasoning)” is the hallmark of the movement. As a “global phenomenon,” Shafi distances himself and the movement from any explicit association with America, as it “would be a clear mistake to somehow reduce the emergence of progressive Islam to being a new ‘American Islam.’”⁵⁵ Shafi points to the fact that “Progressive Muslims are found everywhere in the global Muslim *umma* [community].”⁵⁶ Because “almost all progressive Muslims are profoundly skeptical of nationalism,” they “instinctively and deliberately reject” and attempt to “transform it into an ‘American Islam’ commodity to be exported all over the world.”⁵⁷ They also studiously avoid “appropriation by the United States’ administration, which has used the language of reforming Islam to justify its invasion of Muslim countries such as Iraq.”⁵⁸ Proponents of Progressive Islam “promise of ushering in a real paradigm shift in the relationship of Muslims to both Islam and modernity.”⁵⁹ Even so, Progressive Islam has not defined a world role for America. To do so would be to defeat the universal outlook and scope of Progressive Islam as a reform movement within the contemporary Muslim world itself.

Buddhist Myths and Visions of America

Apart from Robert Thurman’s “ten planks” as presented in an appendix in his Buddhist manifesto, *Inner Revolution*, and beyond Daisaku Ikeda’s vision of the “Second American Renaissance” as heralded in *Songs for America*, what unifies the visions of the Dalai Lama, Robert Thurman, and Ikeda is the goal of establishing democracy on the order of enlightenment principles. According to one commentator, “Buddhist Democracy refers to a parliamentary democracy in which every individual has been awakened to the Principles of Buddhism.”⁶⁰ While there is a great difference between Soka Gakkai and Tibetan Buddhism, both are agreed that democracy, enlightened by Buddhist precepts and praxis, combine to form the most potentially ideal form of governance for the world.

In 1991, the Dalai Lama, who has promoted the concept of a “Buddhist Democracy” among his fellow Tibetans, said that “America has the potential to make this world straight.”⁶¹ By this, he meant America’s world role—

primarily economically and politically. In 1995, the Dalai Lama further elaborated:

The United States must not underestimate its role in the world today. As Americans you should be proud of your heritage, proud of the values upon which your Constitution is based. Accordingly, you should not shirk from your responsibility to bring those same fundamental rights and freedoms to people living under totalitarian regimes.⁶²

America's world role, therefore, is to promote enlightened democracy.

Bahá'í Myths and Visions of America

The Bahá'í Emancipation/Civil War Myth and the Bahá'í Wilsonian Myth are retrospective perspectives within the Bahá'í vision of the destiny of America—which vision is primarily prospective in that it is forward-looking, focusing on America's world role in promoting world unity. The Bahá'í Faith defines a world role for America, which is to play a leadership role in creating an emancipatory future for societies globally. However, the Bahá'í religion studiously eschews any involvement in partisan politics, which is seen as fundamentally divisive. Bahá'ís are therefore apolitical, while working with “the body politic” in trying to broaden and heighten “the consciousness of the oneness of mankind”: “In every Dispensation, the light of Divine Guidance has been focused upon one central theme,” writes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “In this wondrous Revelation, this glorious century, the foundation of the Faith of God and the distinguishing feature of His Law is the consciousness of the Oneness of Mankind.”⁶³ One particular Bahá'í text develops specific reasons for the spiritual leadership that America has the opportunity and, in a sense, the moral obligation to exercise:

On the other hand is a nation that has achieved undisputed ascendancy in the entire Western Hemisphere, whose rulers have been uniquely honored by being collectively addressed by the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation in His Kitáb-i-Aqdas; which has been acclaimed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the “home of the righteous and the gathering-place of the free,”⁶⁴ where the “splendors of His light shall be revealed, where the mysteries of His Faith shall be unveiled”⁶⁵ and belonging to a continent which, as recorded by that same pen, “giveth signs and evidences of very great advancement,”⁶⁶ whose “future is even more promising,”⁶⁷ whose “influence and illumination are far-reaching,”⁶⁸ and which “will lead all nations spiritually.”⁶⁹ Moreover, it is to this great republic of the West that the Center of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh has referred as the nation that has “developed powers and capacities greater and more wonderful than other nations,”⁷⁰ and which “is equipped and empowered to accomplish that

which will adorn the pages of history, to become the envy of the world, and be blest in both the East and the West for the triumph of its people.”⁷¹ It is for this same American democracy that He expressed His fervent hope that it might be “the first nation to establish the foundation of international agreement,” “to proclaim the unity of mankind,” and “to unfurl the Standard of the Most Great Peace,”⁷² that it might become “the distributing center of spiritual enlightenment, and all the world receive this heavenly blessing,”⁷³ and that its inhabitants might “rise from their present material attainments to such a height that heavenly illumination may stream from this center to all the peoples of the world.”⁷⁴ It is in connection with its people that He has affirmed that they are “indeed worthy of being the first to build the Tabernacle of the Great Peace and proclaim the oneness of mankind.”⁷⁵

This is a remarkably visionary statement. Observe how Shoghi Effendi’s vision of America goes far beyond a nationalistic civil religion. This vision transcends national boundaries, overleaps vested national interests, and addresses the interests of the widest “body politic”—the planet Earth itself.⁷⁶ In addition to the Bahá’í Faith’s emphasis on egalitarian social principles, a human spiritual transformation at the levels of the individual and community is needed in order to put those principles into practice. Overcoming racism and other social evils clearly requires both policy and personal change. Here, precept and praxis go hand-in-hand. Bahá’í principles of unity will be effective only to the degree that they are put into practice, both individually and collectively.

Among the American Bahá’ís, it may be said that the Bahá’í community has its counterpart of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Bahá’í philosopher Dr. Alain Leroy Locke (1885–1954). Of Locke, Martin Luther King himself said: “We’re going to let our children know that the only philosophers that lived were not Plato and Aristotle, but W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke came through the universe.”⁷⁷ Interestingly, Locke developed a philosophy of democracy in nine dimensions. Locke’s grand (though not systematic) theory of democracy sequenced local, moral, political, economic, and cultural stages of democracy as they arced through history, with racial, social, spiritual, and world democracy completing the trajectory. Adjunct notions of natural, practical, progressive, creative, intellectual, equalitarian democracy crystallized the paradigm. Seeing America as “a unique social experiment,” Locke’s larger goal was to “Americanize Americans”⁷⁸ and to further democratize democracy itself with the simple yet profound message that equality is the bedrock of democracy: “Eventually, however, just as world-mindedness must dominate and remould [*sic*] nation-mindedness, so we must transform eventually race-mindedness into human-mindedness.”⁷⁹

The Bahá’í perspective on the destiny of America is a singular example of how minority religions, as James Moorhead rightly observed, have

contributed and can presently consecrate their own religious myths of and visions of America for the social benefit of America as a whole.

AN OVERVIEW OF AMERICA'S WORLD ROLE

In the chart below, America's world role—as defined by Protestantism and as redefined by the minority faiths treated in this book—presents a convenient, albeit oversimplified, representation of the results of the investigation conducted over the course of this book. The reader will note points of convergence among the more progressive minority faiths, where America, ideally, would serve as a particular instrument of a universal purpose. Here, the very notion of Manifest Destiny (the right of America to *conquer, colonize, and Christianize* the continent of North America) is replaced by a concept of what might be thought of as a “common destiny”—an overarching, cosmopolitan worldview. This is perhaps best seen in a conspectus of the various visions of America's world role as recapitulated in Table 12.1.

FINAL REFLECTIONS: A WORLD CIVIL RELIGION?

Is there some larger significance to the existence of these myths and visions of America? Without wishing to state the obvious, the religious myths and visions surveyed here deal with some of the perennial problematics in the American experience. They operate as social commentaries on the realities of American life, especially as measured against the ideals of American civil religion—which is where these myths intersect in the public sphere and in civil discourse. These religious myths and visions of America present a full range of mythic and ideological possibilities. To the extent that myths are vehicles of social truths (and thus function as “true lies”⁸⁰), the myths themselves may be compared. From this comparison, certain salient characteristics will fall into focus, which will be briefly touched on here.

Taking an inventory of the ten religions covered in this book, two negative themes stand out: *racial prejudice and religious prejudice*. The obvious examples of these are the religions presented back-to-back in Chapters 7 and 8, that is, Christian Identity and the Nation of Islam. Christian Identity has always been considered radical, and it can never become mainstream. Its proposed homeland (the Northwest Imperative) is, in a sense, the logical outcome of Identity's Two-Seed Myth, the Mud Races Myth, the Lost Tribes Myth, and the Racial Holy War Myth.

In somewhat the same way as Identity represents an extreme form of white nationalism, the Nation of Islam is a species of Black nationalism, as the Black Muslim Yacub Myth, Mother Plane Myth, and the Destruction of America Myth bear out. However, their functional parallelism is a case of

Table 12.1 America's World Role as Defined by Protestantism and Minority Faiths

MINORITY FAITH	AMERICA'S WORLD ROLE
Native American Religion	To promote environmental ethics and ecological sustainability throughout "Turtle Island" and beyond. In the heritage of Deganawidah, to advance global democracy in the interests of world peace.
Protestantism	To promote originally Puritan values of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire. To promote global democracy. To promote "worldwide brotherhood," as expressed by Dr. Martin Luther King's vision of "the World House."
Catholicism	To promote "religious liberty as a basic civil right." To foster "the growth of international cooperation and solidarity in the service of that peace."
Judaism	To promote unity and pluralism "uniting all people in peace and freedom."
Mormon	To promote liberty and equal rights. To strengthen the foundation of society by fostering family values.
Christian Identity	To preserve the purity of the White race. To establish a Whites-only homeland.
Nation of Islam	To realize America's potential to become the "Kingdom of God on earth"—"an egalitarian kingdom structured on truth, where each . . . will be treated with fairness and justice." However: "It is not a time for integration; it is a time for us to separate from our former slave-masters." (2008)
Contemporary Islam	Radical Islamism: No positive world role for America. (Progressive Islam: No definitive world role for America.)
Buddhism	To "bring those same fundamental rights and freedoms to people living under totalitarian regimes" and "to make this world straight." (Dalai Lama) To cultivate "a renaissance and enlightenment science [of] our times." (Robert Thurman) To promote a "Buddhist Democracy." (Dalai Lama, Thurman, Ikeda)
Bahá'í Faith	To "lead all nations spiritually" in order to "unify the world."

two lines diverging. Although they may have functionally intersected in the past, their current directions are increasingly divergent. This is because of the Nation of Islam's relatively recent reconciliation with mainstream Islam. Black Muslims are still Black nationalists, but they have quietly put Elijah Muhammad's racist myths (shared by Malcolm X in "Black Man's History") behind them. The dramatic change that took place when Malcolm X—after his pilgrimage to Mecca, where he personally witnessed a brotherhood of peoples of all races united by their common identity as Muslims—came to a

realization that all whites were not “devils” as Elijah Muhammad had maintained. This is the Malcolm X that America has come to know and honor. The earlier Malcolm X would brook no tolerance in American mainstream society today.

The Protestants, collectively speaking, forged the “master myth” of America. Under its secularized corollary (albeit with much Christian support), the Manifest Destiny Myth, when translated into Congressional policy and duly executed, amounted to wholesale genocide of entire populations of the American Indian, and generally had a devastating impact on all things Indian. As racial prejudice sought religious sanction in the “Curse of Ham” Myth, it was effectively challenged by the African American Exodus Counter-Myth, which functioned to insulate African American Christians from the further impact of what may be described as essentially White forms of “Christianity,” and to produce an African American theology of liberation in its wake. The Latter-day Saints’ Mark of Cain Myth and, to a lesser extent, the Lost Tribes Myth are vestiges of racist beginnings that have effectively been renounced by the Latter-day Saints, but without overt repudiation. It would take something similar to the 1978 revelation received by LDS president Spencer Kimball to overturn some of the entrenched racial attitudes that overtly persist in Christian Identity and that covertly persist in the Nation of Islam, although it is expected that such vestiges of anti-White sentiment will subside within a more racially egalitarian America.

Religious prejudice, the other pervasively negative theme, has run its course as well, although plenty of religious prejudice remains. Not only was Christian Identity motivated by racial hate, but by religious prejudice as well, particularly with respect to Jews. The irony is that Jewish source material—primarily, what Christians have traditionally referred to as the “Old Testament”—was taken up and reworked to serve the purposes of White nationalism. Adam became the progenitor and patriarch of Whites, while Satan had intercourse with Eve and spawned the reptilian non-White races. The same was true in Identity’s appropriation of the Jewish Lost Tribes Myth. While Mormons were not anti-semitic, they also wrested the Lost Tribes Myth out of its originally Jewish context and made them American Indians, whose skin was originally white, but was later cursed with dark skin as a consequence of their unrighteousness. World unity—championed especially by the Dalai Lama’s reformulation of Tibetan Buddhism and by the Bahá’í Faith—reconciles and resolves such racial and religious prejudices into a progressive and constructive agenda for the reconstruction of the world globally.

The alternative visions of America, presented by minority faiths, may be seen as responses to the challenges of pluralism and race, in which minority faiths—America’s alternative religions—implicitly seek to transcend the

legacy of Puritanism in shaping American self-image. Wherever they embody egalitarian and progressive ideals, these minority faiths may be said to share important points of convergence. If visions of America's role in promoting an egalitarian, justice-based world are translated into reality, then, in effect, they operate as projects of universal emancipation. Progressive visions of America's world role, as held by some of the minority faiths presented in this book, have the potential and power to contribute to what White calls "consensus beliefs" and the American "consensus perception of world affairs."

Whatever the merits and demerits of these myths and visions of America, they serve to stimulate reflection on social policy at a national level, and on purpose at an individual level. "What does it mean to be an American?" is a venerable, yet surprisingly fresh question. The question itself, not to mention its possible answers, invites renewed thinking on the purpose for which, under various religious views, people were created and for which America is now the world's superpower. As presented in this book, these myths and visions of America serve as a mirror in which individual and national reflection may take place. True, the mirror may be distorted, but the mirror may also be refined such that it may one day reflect, not the world as it has been, but the world as it may become. America is something to be "religious" about, especially if one has the conviction that America—if it is to live up to its founding and quintessential values—is all about making the world a better place.

Recall that, in *Myths America Lives By*, author Richard Hughes had presented five foundational myths of America. Again, these are the following: (1) the Myth of the Chosen Nation; (2) the Myth of Nature's Nation; (3) the Myth of the Christian Nation; (4) the Myth of the Millennial Nation; and (5) the Myth of the Innocent Nation.⁸¹ Perhaps—and this is tentative at best—the title should now, or in good time, be revised to reflect the past tense—*Myths America Lived By*. If this title is to be kept in its present tense, however, here is how these same myths might have been reshaped by America's minority faiths: (1) the Myth of the *Multilateral* Nation; (2) the Myth of the *Environmental* Nation; (3) the Myth of the *Multifaith* Nation; (4) the Myth of the *Ethical* Nation; and (5) the Myth of the *Cosmopolitan* Nation. This revisioning of the mission and destiny of America is actually the third of three basic types of American civil religion.

In Chapter 1, the reader will recall that Dean Hoge, sociologist at Catholic University of America, has outlined three types of civil visions of America, the first two of which clearly have American Protestant origins. The present writer will simply term these three visions of America as (1) Exemplarism; (2) Vindicationism; and (3) Cosmopolitanism.⁸² In the first two instances, Henry Kissinger has characterized America's world role as both beacon and crusader.⁸³ These may be briefly recapitulated as follows.

(1) *Exemplarism*: The first vision of America is the Puritan vision, as first articulated by John Winthrop: “*Wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the Eyes of all people are upon us.*”⁸⁴ According to Hoge, the Puritan vision “focused on making America an example to the world, a model society to show all the world what a godly and free nation can be.”⁸⁵

(2) *Vindicationism*: From the vision of America as a model nation for other nations to follow led to a more proactive program of action, in which America’s mission was to influence (or coerce) other nations to incorporate American principles of religion and good governance. This second vision, Hoge notes, “saw America as a chosen people with an obligation to work actively in the world to win others to American principles and to safeguard those principles everywhere.”⁸⁶ Although weak at first, this vision was the direct precursor of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny: “It was clearly stated in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, that America’s destiny was to settle the whole continent—and later, to bring freedom and civilization to all peoples.”⁸⁷ This “activistic vision” of America “was a motivating source of the world Christian mission movement and of American expansionism in the late nineteenth century” in that “America would save the world for Christ or for democracy.”⁸⁸

The problem with Manifest Destiny is that the means justified the end, and great evils were perpetrated on Native Americans (i.e., the “First Nations,” to invoke a Canadian term) not to mention pretextual territorial gains at the expense of other nations, of which the U.S.–Mexican War of 1846–1848 offers a prime instance in American history. This was America’s first major conflict driven by the policy of “Manifest Destiny”—the doctrine that America, by dint of its divine destiny, had a God-given right to expand the nation’s borders from sea to shining sea.⁸⁹ As a result of the U.S.–Mexican War, America acquired the northern half of Mexico—a vast territory that later became the states of California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah.

(3) *Cosmopolitanism*: “A third vision of America’s mission,” Hoge goes on to say, “calls for internationalism based not on messianic ideas but on a posture of openness and cooperation, assuming that others have legitimate interests and identities and equally valid perceptions of truth.”⁹⁰ Hoge connects this third ideal with Robert Bellah’s ideal of a “world civil religion.”⁹¹ If America is to be reshaped as a multilateral, environmental, multifaith, ethical, and cosmopolitan nation, it may, in large part, be due to the collective influence of progressive minority faiths. This convergent influence may well be mediated through the instrumentality of commonly held “civil religion,” which may be described as a “vehicle of national religious self-understanding.”⁹²

First described by Robert N. Bellah (professor emeritus of sociology and comparative studies at the University of California, Berkeley), American civil religion is itself in flux. In the conclusion of his seminal essay, “Civil Religion in America,” Bellah foresees the emergence of a “world civil religion”

coefficient with “the emergence of a genuine transnational sovereignty.”⁹³ This world civil religion would necessarily incorporate “vital international symbolism into our civil religion” whereby “American civil religion” would become “simply one part of a new civil religion of the world.”⁹⁴ Obviously it would “draw on religious traditions beyond the sphere of biblical religion alone.”⁹⁵ In other words, while American civil religion has Protestant origins and is a decidedly American phenomenon, a world civil religion would be international in scope and interfaith in nature.

Bellah’s vision of a world civil religion has attracted genuine and widespread criticism. In his defense, Paul Nathanson, author of *Over the Rainbow: The Wizard of Oz as a Secular Myth of America*, notes that “Bellah believed that this process” of promoting a world civil religion “need not disrupt the continuity of American civil religion.”⁹⁶ This is because the notion of a world civil religion is “based not on worship of the nation itself, but on an understanding of American history in the light of an ultimate and universal reality.”⁹⁷ The emergence of a world civil religion would, in the American context, represent a shift from a *national* to a *global* perspective. These two perspectives need not be at odds with one another. A reconciliation is possible. This would necessarily entail an aligning of the two perspectives. “A world civil religion,” Bellah concludes in “Civil Religion in America,” is a world-embracing vision that “could be accepted as a fulfillment and not as a denial of American civil religion”—as “the eschatological hope of American civil religion from the beginning.”⁹⁸ Bellah wrote this statement in 1967. Forty years later, in 2007, Bellah revisited his notion of a world civil religion, reflecting on the role that world religions may play in promoting such a common vision:

But for the creation of a viable and coherent world order a world civil society is surely an essential precondition, and, dare I say it, any actual civil society will have a religious dimension, will need not only a legal and an ethical framework, but some notion that it conforms to the nature of ultimate reality. The biggest immediate problem is the strengthening of global civil society. As I will elaborate in my next post, I would suggest that perhaps the *religious communities of the world may have something to contribute to that global civil society*, and, indeed, that *their participation may be essential for its success*.⁹⁹

Is there a harmonic convergence of the visions of America as held by Protestantism and as redefined by America’s minority faiths? If so, it would look something like this: In the Native American vision of America’s world role, America should promote environmental ethics and ecological sustainability throughout “Turtle Island” and beyond. In the heritage of Deganawidah, America should advance global democracy in the interests of world peace abroad and at home, beginning with healing and repairing the injustices of

the past and mitigating their continuing social and economic effects upon America's indigenous peoples in the present.

In the Protestant vision of America, America should foster the originally Puritan values of liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire, and promote democracy globally as well, through enlightened exemplarism, vindicationism, and cosmopolitanism. The quality of that democracy will be greatly enhanced when America uses her influence to realize and bring into reality a "worldwide brotherhood," as foreseen in Dr. Martin Luther King's vision of "the World House." While the subtitle of this book is "How Minority Faiths Transformed America's World Role," it should be noted that it took the prophetic voice of a vocal minority—primarily African American civil rights leaders—to influence (although not wholly transform) the Protestant vision of America's world role.

Briefly, America fulfills its Catholic mandate by promoting "religious liberty as a basic civil right," and fostering "the growth of international cooperation and solidarity in the service of that peace."¹⁰⁰ Judaism's vision of America is that it promote unity and pluralism "uniting all people in peace and freedom."¹⁰¹ The Mormon vision of America, *inter alia*, is to promote liberty and equal rights, and to strengthen the foundation of society by fostering family values.¹⁰² (Joseph Smith's 1844 political platform of "theodemocracy," however, appears to have no real place in Mormon doctrine.)

America should brook no tolerance for Christian Identity's goal of establishing a Whites-only homeland. While eschewing, if possible, the self-segregation that Louis Farrakhan continues to advocate as of December 2007—"It is not a time for integration; it is a time for us to separate from our former slave-masters"¹⁰³—America can take cognizance of the Nation of Islam's vision that America may realize its potential to become the "Kingdom of God on earth"—"an egalitarian kingdom structured on truth, where each . . . will be treated with fairness and justice."¹⁰⁴ Since contemporary Radical Islamism has no positive world role for America, and since progressive Islam has no definitive world role for America either, the Islamic mandate for America has not reached anything closely resembling a true consensus. Tibetan Buddhism's vision of America is to "bring those same fundamental rights and freedoms to people living under totalitarian regimes," "to make this world straight" (Dalai Lama), and to cultivate "a renaissance and enlightenment science our times" (Robert Thurman), as well as to promote a "Buddhist Democracy" (Dalai Lama, Thurman, Ikeda).

America will fulfill the Bahá'í Faith's vision of its great destiny when it arises to "lead all nations spiritually" in order to "unify the world." America will then be "prepared to play a preponderating role, as foretold by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in the hoisting of the standard of the Lesser Peace, in the unification

of mankind, and in the establishment of a world federal government on this planet.”¹⁰⁵ Only then will

that great republic . . . continue to evolve, undivided and undefeatable, until the sum total of its contributions to the birth, the rise and the fruition of that world civilization, the child of the Most Great Peace and hallmark of the Golden Age of the Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh, will have been made, and its last task discharged.¹⁰⁶

Civil religion can be the common ground of progressive religious values, which have the potential to exert a positive influence in the civic sphere. To the extent that civil religion incorporates the myth of America’s spiritual destiny, that very myth will itself be subject to change and modifications, in accordance with the requirements of the times in which people live. “Part of the myth’s resilience is due to the ability of Americans to adjust their religious sense of the nation’s destiny to changed circumstances and altered expectations,” Conrad Cherry observes. “It is reasonable to conclude that the same resilience will be evident in the future.”¹⁰⁷ As social commentator John O’Sullivan puts it, America’s “sense of itself” has always had to adjust to new historical circumstances and changed historical realities:

America’s sense of itself always had a self-conscious, even ideological, side. First, the United States, founded by a rebellion against legitimate authority, had to explain and justify that rebellion to mankind. Then, the growing nation had to justify taking over a continent from its previous owners. Finally, it had to persuade the immigrants arriving on that continent that, in assimilating to the American nation, they were not being false to themselves, that Americanism was in some sense a universal creed to which all could be admitted.¹⁰⁸

The changed circumstances of today may be summed up in one word: *globalization*. Globalization refers to “both the compression of the world and intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole” and as “both concrete global interdependence and consciousness of the global whole.”¹⁰⁹ It is further defined as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.”¹¹⁰ Ethical responses to globalization, which are essentially world order issues,¹¹¹ have given rise to a search for values of egalitarianism, equity, and sustainability—a worldview that some have called “globalism.” As a response to globalization, globalism may be viewed as a reflex or extension of Kantian cosmopolitanism and as the “moral universalism of international relations.”¹¹² Globalism, as a form of international ethics, may be considered to be the equivalent of a renewed cosmopolitanism that, today, views the world as an organic whole and advocates a global ethic commensurate with the needs of the twenty-first century.

Religions in America can and should translate their shared ideals into an American civil religion—and a corresponding ethic—that can help form a basis for the world civil religion that Robert Bellah envisions. To refine the point, religions ideally will remythologize and revision America in increasingly convergent and harmonic ways, offering an informal consensus on what may be called *proactive American cosmopolitanism*, where national interests are integrated with supranational interests, linking American foreign policy and the requirements of world order. If attuned to the needs of this day and age, these thought-orienting myths and action-incentive visions have every potential to serve as a spiritual mandate for America. Under the gaze of their ideals, universally minded religions can set the stage for the next quantum leap in the world's social evolution—transitioning from war to peace, from nationalism to internationalism, from religious particularism to spiritual universalism, from racial animosity to racial amity, from gender repression to gender equality, and from resource exploitation to environmental renewal. Universal values actually devalue uniformity and promote diversity. Where there is a common ground of universal values, unity can therefore be the *effect* of diversity.

Myths and visions of American have attracted the theoretical interests of scholars for generations. The late Canadian Americanist Sacvan Bercovitch was among the foremost of these scholars. Bercovitch wrote of “transformations in the symbolic construction of America.”¹¹³ What would happen if the three paradigmatic visions of America—exemplarism, vindicationism, and cosmopolitanism—were interwoven and transformed to meet the needs of the world of today and tomorrow? Telescoping these into the future, perhaps America can, one day, draw on the power of its moral authority (exemplarism)—if and when America resolves its race, class, and gender issues—to benignly and effectively exert its considerable political influence (vindicationism) for the promotion of global peace through world unity (cosmopolitanism).

For this ever to happen, the adoption of universal principles of good governance, of individual and group rights, of the equitable distribution of the world's wealth and resources, of environmental sustainability, and of an emergent cosmopolitan order, will stand as a set of self-evident moral imperatives. In all this, America's leadership in bringing about enlightened internationalism may be paradoxically characterized as a *unilateral multilateralism*—in which America *unilaterally* takes the initiative to foster the conditions whereby the community of nations works in *multilateral* concert, in an orchestration of sovereign powers for the global good. Whether this entails endorsing arbitration treaties, lending more authority to the Hague courts, or encouraging qualified disarmament, national interest and world order can be guided by the ethical principles offered by universally oriented religious worldviews.

Consider the example of President Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919), 1906 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who, in 1902, took the initiative in opening the international Court of Arbitration at The Hague. Although founded in 1899, the Court of Arbitration had not been called upon by any power in its first three years of existence. When the United States and Mexico agreed to arbitrate, before the Hague Tribunal, their differences over the Pious Foundations of California, this example was followed by other powers, thus rendering the formerly inert arbitration machinery operational. Roosevelt played a prominent role in extending the use of arbitration to international problems in the Western Hemisphere as well.¹¹⁴ Such leadership in international affairs was guided by religious principle. Writing that American leadership must exemplify the “ideals of democracy, of liberty under law, of social progress through peaceful industry, of education and commerce, and of uncorrupted Christianity,” Roosevelt was steered by the moral compass of Micah 6:8: “He has told you, O moral, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”¹¹⁵ As President Roosevelt prophetically said: “Upon the success of our experiment much depends, not only as regards our own welfare, but as regards the welfare of mankind.”¹¹⁶ In fine, America’s political, economic, and scientific power can also serve as a reflex of *moral power*. Will America—taking Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson as moral exemplars of American cosmopolitanism—*unilaterally* take a leading role in initiating the *multilateral* process of bringing about the following event, as presaged by one of the minority faiths, the Bahá’í Faith?

True civilization will unfurl its banner in the midmost heart of the world whenever a certain number of its distinguished and high-minded sovereigns—the shining exemplars of devotion and determination—shall, for the good and happiness of all mankind, arise, with firm resolve and clear vision, to establish the Cause of Universal Peace. They must make the Cause of Peace the object of general consultation, and seek by every means in their power to establish a Union of the nations of the world. They must conclude a binding treaty and establish a covenant, the provisions of which shall be sound, inviolable and definite. They must proclaim it to all the world and obtain for it the sanction of all the human race. This supreme and noble undertaking—the real source of the peace and well-being of all the world—should be regarded as sacred by all that dwell on earth. All the forces of humanity must be mobilized to ensure the stability and permanence of this Most Great Covenant. In this all-embracing Pact the limits and frontiers of each and every nation should be clearly fixed, the principles underlying the relations of governments towards one another definitely laid down, and all international agreements and obligations ascertained.¹¹⁷

In this remarkable religious text, written by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1875, the cause of universal peace—the product of a stable and enlightened world

order—should be regarded as a “sacred” undertaking by peoples of all nations and faiths. In 1963—88 years later—Pope John XXIII opened his magisterial *Pacem in Terris* with these words: “Peace on Earth—which man throughout the ages has so longed for and sought after—can never be established, never guaranteed, except by the diligent observance of the divinely established order.”¹¹⁸ In other words, world order—that is, the state of ideal international relations described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as “true civilization” and Pope John XXIII as “peace on earth”—is essentially a sacred task best served when based on the principles of justice and reciprocity advocated by the religions of the world, whether in America or abroad. Indeed, according to the Universal House of Justice (internationally elected Bahá’í governing council) in a message addressed “To the Peoples of the World” in 1985, “World peace is not only possible but inevitable.”¹¹⁹ In this document, the role of religion is made clear: “No serious attempt to set human affairs aright, to achieve world peace, can ignore religion.”¹²⁰ America, in protecting *freedom* of religion while proscribing the *establishment* of religion, would do well to heed the enlightened cosmopolitanism of the minority faiths that promote it.

As a grand synthesis of the ideals held by America’s progressive Protestant and minority faiths, American civil religion can play a preponderating role in inspiring a world civil religion that, in turn, universalizes these egalitarian values for all nations. As Pope John Paul II said to President Ronald Reagan in 1987, America has a great responsibility in the world today:

The more powerful a nation is, the greater becomes its international responsibility, the greater also must be its commitment to the betterment of the lot of those whose very humanity is constantly being threatened by want and need. . . . America needs freedom to be herself and to fulfill her mission in the world.¹²¹

If America arises to accomplish this mission, then America will fulfill its world role and realize its prophetic destiny—*whether imagined or real*. America will have lived up to the grand destiny envisioned by the more optimistic religions surveyed in these pages. Then will the noblest myths of America have become reality and their grandest visions realized—in the new American cosmopolitanism of world unity which, in the immortal words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., will “transform this world-wide neighborhood into a world-wide brotherhood”¹²² and by which, according to one Bahá’í text, “the oneness of the whole body of nations will be made the ruling principle of international life.”¹²³

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88. *Century of Light*. Prepared under the direction of the Universal House of Justice (Wilmette, IL: U.S. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2001 [2003 printing]), 138.
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92. Alain Locke, "America's Part in World Peace" (1925). Qtd. Christopher Buck, *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2005), 241 (emphasis added). Under the auspices of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, *World Order* magazine has published two special issues on Alain Locke. See Christopher Buck, "Alain Locke: Race Leader, Social Philosopher, Bahá'í Pluralist." Special Issue: Alain Locke: Dean of the Harlem Renaissance and Baha'í Race-Amity Leader. *World Order* 36.3 (2005): 7–36; Alain Locke, "Alain Locke in His Own Words: Three Essays" ("The Gospel for the Twentieth Century" [39–42]; "Peace Between Black and White in the United States" [42–45]; "Five Phases of Democracy" [45–48]; Alain Locke, "The Moon Maiden" [37]) *World Order* 36.3 (2005): 37–48 (previously unpublished essays, introduced by Christopher Buck and co-edited with *World Order* editor Dr. Betty J. Fisher); and (2) Christopher Buck and Betty J. Fisher, ed. and intro., "Alain Locke: Four Talks Redefining Democracy, Education, and World Citizenship." *World Order* 38.3 (2006/2007): 21–41. (Alain Locke, "The Preservation of the American Ideal"; "Stretching Our Social Mind"; "On Becoming World Citizens"; "Creative Democracy.")

CHAPTER 12: CONCLUSION: HOW MINORITY FAITHS REDEFINED AMERICA'S WORLD ROLE

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3. Harold Hongju Koh, "Foreword: On American Exceptionalism," 1481, n. 4.
4. Edward A. Kolodziej, "American Power and Global Order." *From Superpower to Besieged Global Power: Restoring World Order After the Failure of the Bush Doctrine*. Ed. Edward A. Kolodziej and Roger E. Kanet (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 3–30 [16–17].
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18. Bron Taylor, "Environmental Ethics." *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, 1:597–608.
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67. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 104.
68. *Ibid.*, 104.
69. *Ibid.*, 104.
70. *Ibid.*, 103.
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