

The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism

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ABSTRACT

Exceptionalism seems like a perfectly unexceptional concept—until one asks what it means. Those who use the term will then either offer definite, but usually conflicting, definitions or greet the question with a bewildered stare. Exceptionalism is evidently a far less obvious idea than most suppose. This essay has two parts. It begins by looking at the different ways in which Americans conceive of exceptionalism, treating perceptions and interpretations but leaving the question of whether America is in fact exceptional to the real social scientists. It will turn next to one of the important meanings of exceptionalism—the idea of a mission—and subject the dominant understanding of this idea to critical analysis, offering an alternative account.

Exceptionalism seems like a perfectly unexceptional concept—until one asks what it means. Users of the term will then either offer specific, but often conflicting, definitions or greet the question with a bewildered stare. Exceptionalism is evidently a far less obvious idea than most suppose.

In a modest effort at clarification, I begin this essay by surveying the different ways Americans have conceived of exceptionalism, treating perceptions and interpretations but leaving the question of whether America is in fact exceptional to the real social scientists. Next, I select one important dimension of the concept for more detailed treatment: the understanding of exceptionalism as a mission. My contention is that the predominant scholarly view, which holds that there is one core understanding of the mission that has been shaped mainly by Puritan religious thought, is incorrect. There have instead been different views influenced by different sources, including (besides religion) various philosophical doctrines, applications of scientific theories, and reasoning based on political-historical analysis. The exaggerated emphasis on religion may have begun as an innocent error of scholarly interpretation, but it is being

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perpetuated today by those seeking, for political purposes, to discredit any possible idea of a political mission in the conduct of foreign affairs. Finally, having argued that religion's role has been more limited than is usually supposed, I conclude by examining the considerable influence it has had and by pointing to some of the ways it may have contributed to the dialogue on American exceptionalism.

THE MEANINGS OF EXCEPTIONALISM

Until recently—say the last 2 or 3 years—few outside of the academic world ever encountered the term “exceptionalism.” It was reserved almost exclusively to scholarly discourse, used mostly by social scientists and occasionally by historians and students of American studies. Today, the word has become ubiquitous, appearing in political speeches, newspaper columns, and blogospheric rants. Exceptionalism has gone viral. It serves for the most part as a term of polarization that divides liberals from conservatives.

Liberals have tended to disparage exceptionalism, openly when they dare, more discreetly when they fear a backlash. Liberals would like Americans to think of America as being more “ordinary” and in step with the advanced democracies in the world. In domestic politics, “ordinary” means an expanded welfare state, policies that promote greater income equality, and—it goes without saying—a network of high-speed trains. In foreign affairs, it refers to an America that does not always tout itself as the main world power, that is more solicitous of the international community, and that does not proclaim a universal standard of right deriving from the “laws of nature” or “nature's god” (expressions that hearken back to America's founding). Although liberals may not say so directly, they want to take America down a notch—and this very sincerely for its own good. Liberals are antiexceptionalists, deploring the spiritedness and narrow form of patriotism they see as connected with the concept. Like Stephen Walt of Harvard University, they like to proclaim “the myth of American exceptionalism,” pointing out that the doctrine makes it “harder for Americans to understand why others are ... often alarmed by U.S. policies and frequently irritated by what they see as U.S. hypocrisy.” US foreign policy would be “more effective if Americans were less convinced of their own unique virtues and less eager to proclaim them” (Walt 2011).

President Obama appeared to embrace views along these lines early in his presidency. Asked by a reporter in Strasbourg, France, whether he subscribed, as his predecessors had, “to the school of American exceptionalism that sees America as uniquely qualified to lead the world,” the president began by observing: “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek

exceptionalism.”¹ His words were a far cry from a “Lincolnian” rhetoric depicting America as “the last best hope of man on earth.”²

Conservatives have rallied around exceptionalism, often passionately so. Conservatives want Americans to think of themselves as special, and they take great pride in pointing to how America is unlike other advanced democracies. In domestic affairs, conservatives prefer a more limited government, which they consider to be the cornerstone of liberty; they favor an economy in which incomes reflect market forces, not government decisions; and they of course champion travel by stagecoach. In foreign affairs, conservatives hold the idea of the nation in high esteem and bristle at the notion of America being governed by diktats of the international community. They regard America as the premier world power and, therefore, necessarily and rightly subject to different rules than other nations. Conservatives are not embarrassed to refer to general concepts of right in the terms used by past American statesmen. “Universal values,” a phrase President Obama now often invokes, are fine, as long as they are anchored in the good old Declaration of Independence.

A rising star in the Republican Party, Senator Marco Rubio made “exceptionalism” the central theme of his 2010 senate campaign in Florida. In his victory speech, he warmed to the task by describing America as “a place without equal in the history of all mankind,” in part because in “almost every other place in the world ... what you were going to be when you grow up was determined for you” (Beinhart 2010). Other Republicans running for the presidency in 2012 followed in the same vein. Newt Gingrich launched his campaign combined with the release of a new book titled *A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters*. The theme was also at the core of Mitt Romney’s foreign policy statements: “America must lead the world. ... I believe we are an exceptional country, with a unique destiny and role in the world. ... This is America’s moment. ... I will never apologize for America.”³

It is unclear who cast the first stone in these exceptional wars—whether it was liberals, who wagered that the term might discredit conservatism, or conservatives, who believed that it could rally Americans to their agenda. It hardly matters. More important is the question of which side has gained politically from the emergence of this new political word. The verdict is still

1. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, press release, April 4, 2009 (http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/News-Conference-By-President-Obama-4-04-2009/).

2. Abraham Lincoln, annual message to Congress, December 1, 1862 (<http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/congress.htm>).

3. Mitt Romney, speech at the Citadel in Charleston, SC, October 7, 2011 (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2011/10/07/text-of-mitt-romneys-speech-on-foreign-policy-at-the-citadel/>).

out. Conservatives think exceptionalism has worked to their advantage. They can cite survey evidence (from Gallup; Jones 2010) showing that a huge majority of Americans (80%) agrees with the statement “the United States has a unique character because of its history and Constitution that sets it apart from other nations as the greatest in the world.”⁴ Yet what such generic findings measure, if anything, is difficult to say. For their part, some liberals believe they have gained ground, at least at the elite level, because of how exceptionalism is conceived in the area of foreign affairs. The more the term is touted, they think, the less attractive it seems, making us look arrogant and beholden to a messianic mission.

How language is employed in politics obeys its own inscrutable logic. Sometimes political terminology manages to clarify matters beyond what one finds in social science (think of “cold war”), but at other times it brings only greater confusion. The introduction of exceptionalism into political discourse has perhaps helped to make clear to all the rank ordering between spiritedness (favored by exceptionalists) and social justice (important for the antiexceptionalists), but otherwise it is hard to see how the word has promoted more intelligent debate. Consider the following three points.

First, exceptionalism packs different ideas under the same label. Sometimes it refers to matters of domestic affairs, at other times to matters of foreign affairs. John Locke once enunciated the wish—he knew it could never be completely realized—that every general concept should designate something that is clear and distinct. Otherwise people end up heatedly disputing over a word while losing sight of the substance of the issues involved. It is probably a truism of political speech that if one has trouble defining immediately what a term means, someone else is using it a different way.

Second, if people have something they value or oppose, would it not be better for them to speak directly of the particular things themselves—say, the blessings of liberty or the dangers of interventionism—than to get wrapped up in disputes about American exceptionalism? After all, no one really would ever sacrifice himself or herself for the cause of exceptionalism.

Finally, there is that annoying little suffix “ism.” In the political world it often connotes an ideology claiming to have pat answers to all problems, while in the intellectual world it is frequently appended to perfectly comprehensible adjectives to create vast abstractions, as in “perfectionism,” “probabilism,” or “fallibilism.” Exceptionalism constitutes one small step for abstraction, one giant leap for abstractionism. Not much good ever comes from airy concepts of this kind.

4. Gallup describes its poll as testing the “view commonly referred to as ‘U.S. exceptionalism,’” although the question does not explicitly use this term (Jones 2010).

Using a term because of which a party benefits or loses is an important consideration for partisans. Political scientists, however, are beholden to a different standard; they must employ language to shed light on the realities of political life. In that spirit, an examination of the etymology of exceptionalism may help provide some clarity about its meaning.

Its frequent use in social science before it exploded onto the political scene might lead one to think that the term goes back far into American history. But this turns out not to be the case. Take John Winthrop, the person most often associated with originating the concept. Aboard the *Arbella* in 1630, Winthrop described the Puritan settlement to be built as “the city on the hill,” a phrase usually recalled today, thanks to Ronald Reagan’s embellishment, as “the shining city on the hill.” And Winthrop went on to add the further exceptionalist theme that “the eyes of all people are upon us.” But nowhere did he ever refer to his position as his doctrine of “exceptionalism.” Q1

Nor for that matter did Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville is widely credited with having developed the social scientific idea of exceptionalism, meaning uniqueness in relation to most other nations. America, as he showed, was distinct in its historical circumstance of having experienced no feudal past. But what of the term? Modern analysts have scoured Tocqueville’s works in search of a mention, in the hope of receiving his benediction. All of their prodigious efforts have yielded no more than one oblique reference, which on examination has no relation to any plausible meaning of the concept. In explaining why Americans do so little to cultivate the arts and sciences, Tocqueville attributes the deficiency to the harsh physical conditions that originally deprived them of the time and leisure to develop a higher culture: “the situation of the Americans is therefore entirely exceptional, and it is to be believed that no other democratic people will ever be placed in it” (de Tocqueville 2002, 430). If this is the meaning of exceptionalism, Americans who favor the term should probably consider fleeing to Great Britain.

Finally, many consider Ronald Reagan to be the most eloquent modern exponent of exceptionalism. A lovely passage from his farewell address shows why:

I’ve spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don’t know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and

the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still.⁵

Yet Ronald Reagan, as far as I know, never used the term “exceptionalism.”

Although scholarly study of the concept goes back a long time, the coinage of the word did not occur until relatively recently. A database search of the word in the social science indexes reveals that, with one notable exception, “exceptionalism” does not appear in any of the literature until the late 1950s. The honor goes to Max Lerner in a book titled *America as a Civilization* (1957). The exception goes back to a thesis proposed by the leader of the American Communist party, Jay Lovestone. Lovestone used the term in the 1920s, perhaps for the first time, to describe America's path to the forthcoming revolution, which, because capitalism had achieved a temporary stability here, would regrettably be slightly delayed in comparison to the other advanced nations. The thesis led to a flurry of articles, mostly in Russian, on exceptionalism. Lovestone's position was noticed by none other than the chairman of the Comintern, Joseph Stalin, who had Lovestone expelled from the party for committing a cardinal Marxist sin: deviationism (Klehr 2010, 41).

The most fruitful approach to studying the meaning of exceptionalism is to examine how scholars have used it. The common denominator is a claim to uniqueness, which the investigator may then confirm or deny. But the focus or content of what exactly is asserted to be unique has varied enormously. In fact, it is fair to say that exceptionalism designates a family of concepts, not one. None of its possible meanings is necessarily better or more correct but just different. In the end, it is a matter of the analyst selecting a variant that is of interest or importance for a given inquiry.

Surveying some of the possibilities illustrates this point. Exceptionalism may refer to the idea that there is (a) something different about America or (b) something special about America. “Different” is the predominant meaning embraced by descriptive social science. It proceeds to the investigation of various features of society in advanced countries to see whether America displays greater difference overall from these nations than they display from one another. Many studies over the years have addressed this theme, beginning with the two seminal works most frequently cited in this genre: Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and Werner Sombart's *Why There Is No Socialism in America* (1906). The idea of America's non-European character was also at the core of Frederick Turner's famous thesis on the frontier and Louis Hartz's

5. Ronald Reagan, farewell address, January 11, 1989 (<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronaldreaganfarewelladdress.html>).

The Liberal Tradition in America (Turner 1920; Hartz 1955). Since then, such notable scholars as Byron Shafer, Seymour Martin Lipset, John Kingdon, and James Q. Wilson have addressed the topic from this perspective (Shafer 1991; Lipset 1996; Kingdon 1999; Wilson and Schuck 2008). Without recounting the details of this research, much evidence has been adduced to show that America is a statistical outlier on many important features (including size of government, the number of voluntary associations per capita, rates of private philanthropic activity, and commitment to personal freedom). In the last 2 decades, research has indicated American distinctiveness on two other dimensions: professions of religious faith and birthrate (both higher). Of course, America also has a set of “exceptional” pathologies, like higher rates of penal incarceration.

“Special” means different in a certain way. It goes beyond an empirical finding to assert a normative claim, usually for what is worthy or better but sometimes of just the opposite. Intellectuals have often engaged in such discussions. Yet specialness itself—which will be pursued in this essay—subdivides into two distinct ideas: (a) the possession of a certain quality or (b) the embrace of a task or mission. In the first sense, which has spilled over into political discourse, defenders of exceptionalism will refer, for example, to liberty and to the opportunities that liberty affords, as in George Will’s characterization of the concept: “Americans are exceptionally committed to limited government because they are exceptionally confident of social mobility through personal striving” (2011). In the second sense, it refers to something Americans think this country has been called on to do. A mission is undertaken not for enjoyment or profit but as a responsibility in fulfilling a larger purpose. Louis Kossuth, the Hungarian patriot who visited in 1852, articulated one version of this theme. It was “America’s destiny,” he noted, “to become the cornerstone of Liberty on earth. ... Should the Republic of America ever lose this consciousness of this destiny that moment would just as surely be the beginning of America’s decline as the 19th of April 1775 was the beginning of the Republic of America” (cited in Wood 2011, 321).

The idea of a nation having a mission—the option I will discuss—is widely regarded today as controversial. Nations, many think, should do no more than live and let live, behaving, so to speak, like good neighbors cutting their grass and taking out their trash. Any purpose that goes beyond this one is a throwback to the benighted era of nationalism. The fact that so many Americans persist in thinking in terms of a mission, however one judges this fact, is very likely today to be an example of exceptionalism in the social scientific meaning. It makes us a statistical outlier, at least among the democracies. Reaction against Americans’ belief in a mission is also one of the major sources of the ideology known as “anti-Americanism.” Persons in other

nations resent what they consider to be America's self-designation as a special nation endowed with a great historical task.

Once again, it is possible to consider refining or subdividing the idea of a mission. One could look first at the character of the mission, asking whether it refers to fulfilling (a) a religious purpose that stands above and beyond politics, in which America is bidden to play a role in God's divine plan, or (b) a political purpose that seeks to advance a certain form of government—liberal democracy—throughout the world. Selecting this latter option, one could then proceed to ask about its source or justification: Does the commission to promote liberal democracy come from (a) a religious command or (b) a rational body of thought, such as philosophy, philosophy of history, science, or political-historical analysis?

Unlike the previous sets of options presented, in which each led to a fairly distinct line of scholarly inquiry, the tendency in speaking of the political mission has been to conflate these different analytic categories and offer a single account. The dominant view of the mission begins with the claim that Americans consider themselves a chosen people. Chosenness is held to be in its origins a religious idea that goes all the way back to Puritan New England and its strain of millennial theology. At first this theology saw God's plan as occurring on the plane of sacred history, without regard to any worldwide political goal, but at some point in the mid-eighteenth century, the religious view fused with the idea of spreading American principles of government (liberty and republicanism). Ever since, this idea of the mission has powerfully structured America's view of its role in the world. It is true that not every statement of the mission has explicitly evoked this religious kernel—think here of some oft-quoted phrases of Thomas Jefferson—but in the end, under the alchemy produced by the word “secularization,” almost all statements of mission are taken, somehow, to be expressions of the original religious doctrine. It is true also that in some instances religious and nonreligious ideas have been commingled, but again it is the original religious element that is taken to be the driving force.

In brief, the mission is understood to derive from a religiously inspired errand to promote liberty or liberal democracy in the world. A line runs from seventeenth-century Puritan thought, to the Revolution, to the mid-nineteenth-century doctrine of manifest destiny, to late nineteenth-century American imperialism, to Wilsonian idealism, to cold war anticommunism, and finally to George W. Bush's unilateralism. These are manifestations of a common theme. Given its theological source—namely, the belief that God provides a warrant for America's mission—many identify it as having a naturally self-righteous dogmatic form. It is not unsurprising, therefore, that, once the power was available, the mission might often express itself in an

imperialist or unilateralist form. America has lived on the verge, so to speak, of a crusade, although a few have interpreted this mission as being properly promoted by setting an example and without the exercise of an assertive foreign policy.

Accounts of the dominant view naturally seek out the purest expressions of this position. A favorite source is Senator Albert Beveridge, a well-known historian and a strong proponent of the Spanish-American War and of the annexation of the Philippines. In one often-cited speech to the Senate in 1900, Beveridge explained that God “has given us the spirit of progress to overwhelm the forces of reaction throughout the earth. He has made us adept at government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples. Were it not for such a force as this the world would relapse into barbarism and night. ... And of all our races ... he has marked the American people as his chosen nation to finally lead in the redemption of the world” (cited in Bellah 1992, 37–38).

Q2

The dominant view is in the first instance a scholarly position that has drawn on a number of sources. Included are works by students of Puritanism, many of whom have developed the peculiar habit of claiming Puritan thought to be the key to understanding the unfolding of American history.⁶ Another important source is scholarship of American foreign policy, which has been attracted to a simple catchall category to account for the influence of American thought on the nation’s conduct in international relations. Antiexceptionalists have widely embraced the dominant view because they find that it can be easily adapted to discredit the idea of mission. The reason is that its premises run counter to some of the most powerfully held beliefs of our time. Although there may be reasons to defend the policies of expansionism, very few today would feel comfortable championing Beveridge’s bald expressions of imperialism, especially when the freighted word of “race” is thrown into the equation.⁷ Furthermore, within the intellectual community today, any claim that God is enmeshed directly with the fate of a nation is certain to be regarded as unfathomable, if not repellent, and such “God talk” is regarded as all the more objectionable because it is thought to derive from “scripturalist” or “fundamentalist” religious beliefs.

If reasons are needed to support these almost spontaneous reactions, antiexceptionalists offer three weighty arguments. First, belief in a mission leads Americans to react ideologically—actually theologically—to world

6. See Hudson (1965), Cherry (1971), Bercovitch (1978), Tuveson (1980), and Gelernter (2007). For a full survey of literature on exceptionalism, see Litke (2010).

7. The term “race” was ubiquitous in social science and philosophy at the time, and it did not carry the same sinister implications that it does today.

events, resulting in imprudent foreign policy ventures. Second, a religious worldview is especially dangerous in our time. Is not the problem in the world today, many ask, religious fundamentalism? There can be no hope for a peace if the future is a struggle among faiths, a contest between jihads and crusades. Finally, in what is strictly speaking a theological argument, the use of religion in direct support of a nation and its foreign policy is said to be idolatrous. True religion is beyond this kind of narrow, particularistic thinking.

Antiexceptionalists also find that the dominant view works “structurally” to promote their position. According to the dominant view, America has had, and given its history could only have had, one form to its understanding of the mission: a religiously inspired idea. If this is so, and if the consequences have been as harmful as antiexceptionalists contend, then a reasonable person must reject any idea of a mission and seek an alternative approach. Where antiexceptionalists are not partisans of the ideology of global citizenship and postnationalism, they stand ready to plant their flag inside the school of thought in international relations known as “realism.” Realism does not mean looking at the phenomena as they actually present themselves—for otherwise belief in a mission, which realists acknowledge to exist and so often decry, would be a part of their analysis of what moves states. Realism instead relies on a reconstituted “model” according to which the players in international affairs are posited to act on the basis of a calculation of their interest. Exactly what is included in a state’s interest is not as clear as many realists would have us believe, although they place the emphasis on the factor of maintaining and increasing power. But one point is beyond dispute: realism means conducting foreign affairs without any idea of a mission. Realism and mission are notions of anti-theological inspiration.

Many realists add a coda in the form of an argument of “declinism,” which asserts that America’s capacity to project power in the world is now slipping. In the latest version, decline is said to result from the nation’s more limited economic resources, which derive from our indebtedness and budgetary constraints. The trend of decline cannot, or will not, be reversed. Accordingly, whatever some might wish for in terms of exercising global leadership, America can no longer afford to promote a mission in a robust sense. Americans must learn to think of themselves as more ordinary—that is, not exceptional—because they *are* more ordinary. A few in the realist camp lament this result, regarding it as a loss for America and for the world, but many applaud it, although usually concealing their glee beneath a veil of detached analysis. Realism is a cover for “triumphalist declinism”: blessed is the nation that is declining, it shall disinherit the earth.

EXCEPTIONALISM AS MISSION

I turn now to an assessment of the dominant view of the American mission. It is, I believe, fundamentally, indeed almost self-evidently, flawed. Only its constant repetition, to the point that few bother to try to conceive of an alternative, has obscured what are clear facts. Like any paradigm, it holds its adherents in thrall to a central line of argument, inducing them to ignore or undervalue all the evidence that does not fit the main thesis.

Contrary to what the dominant view holds, the idea of a mission in America has not been a single doctrine. It has had (and still has) a variant that is primarily religious, focused on the role of faith community in the divine plan, and a variant that is primarily political, focused on the fate of republican government in the world. The political mission, which is of primary interest here, has been justified on very different grounds: sometimes by religious ideas but more often by ideas from philosophy, science, or political analysis. Furthermore, in the instances when religious and nonreligious ideas about the mission have been commingled, the nonreligious ideas have often been the driving force. Finally, the religious ideas that have influenced the political mission have not always been orthodox or “fundamentalist.” More often than not, they follow strands of what is known as “liberal theology,” which seeks to bring religion into line with existing philosophic or scientific doctrines.

What is at stake in this debate apart from the accuracy of historical interpretation? As discussed, the historical interpretation of the dominant view has spilled over into current policy debates. Antiexceptionalists have embraced the dominant view, finding that they can put it to use to discredit the idea of the mission. One effect of the alternative position to be developed here would be to free contemporary policy thinking from the conceptual straightjacket of conceiving of the mission as having only one form. By viewing the American political tradition as offering a number of different models of a mission, it might be possible to conceive of the mission in a fairer, and less ideological, light. Certain formulations of the mission may have been, and may be, dangerous; others may have been, and may be, helpful, supplying the nation with energy, collective commitment, and purpose.

The period to be surveyed here runs from the nation’s origins until the end of the nineteenth century. It was during this time, according to the dominant view, that the understanding of the mission was forged and bred into America’s cultural DNA. The four most important statements of the idea of the mission occurred in Puritan thought, the political theory of the founders, the case made for manifest destiny (1830–60), and the defense of so-called imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century.

The Puritans were children of the Reformation. One stream of Reformation theology was marked by the reintroduction of the historical dimension of Christianity. God acts inside of time, there is a direction to history under divine guidance, and God may choose to act through a particular agent. This dimension was most fully elaborated, lasted longest, and had its greatest influence among those who settled in New England.

For the Puritans the idea of being a selected agent was more than a theological possibility; it was a lived experience, formed in their exodus and errand in the wilderness. Something was taking place here, in this out-of-the-way land—“in this little place called New England,” as Cotton Mather put it—that had decisive significance for God’s plan. Much as God had acted through the Israelites in biblical times, he was acting now through the Puritans, in an age in which the millennium was believed to be at hand. God’s work was not just something happening to the Puritans but something that imposed a task to contribute to the achievement of the divine purpose. That purpose was in no sense a political plan for a nation, as the nation in any case did not yet exist. The “idea” (as Tocqueville put it) for which the Puritans came was within the realm of “sacred history” concerned foremost with God’s plan, not political history concerned with the things of this world.⁸ Q3

A direct link between religion and the fate of the nation and the cause of republican government is a theme that came to prominence much later, in the period leading up to the Revolution. In a way analogous to how some in Europe had proclaimed a doctrine of the divine right of kings, Americans began to elaborate what amounted to a doctrine of the divine right of republics. This theme was not initially a part of sacred history or mission but a divine teaching or injunction of what was the biblical idea of right. Based especially on readings of the Old Testament, in particular the book of Samuel, it was widely concluded that God had directly favored republican government, with the monarchy coming about as a result of rebellious and sinful people. But this teaching began to find some support from new accounts of sacred history, with some thinkers beginning to draw a connection between God’s divine plan for history, which now involved putting an end to tyranny in the world, and the achievement of an independent and free republic in America. This religious idea, now part of some accounts

8. I use the semitechnical term “sacred history,” a translation of the German theological word *Heilsgeschichte*. English-speaking authors have used other expressions such as “ecclesiastical history” (John Foxe’s category in *Acts and Monuments*) or “church history” (Cotton Mather’s category in *Magnalia Christi Americana*).

of a fused American religious-political mission, sanctified the nation in its revolutionary cause.⁹

The main political leaders in the Revolution and the founding era focused on the political realm. It seems that especially in the founding era, from 1780 to 1795, not religion itself but religion in the form of sacred history had little influence, perhaps the least that it has had in all of American history. Where the idea of mission is found, its sources are in different bodies of rationalist thought. One notion of mission, in the thought of Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, drew from a strand of enlightenment philosophy, which from the time of Bacon and Descartes had spoken of a great project of transforming the world by the application of a new scientific method. Americans, according to Paine and Jefferson, were the first to make use of this method in the political realm, availing themselves of scientific thought to guide the construction of a new kind of political order. American history was placed into the narrative of the enlightenment project, as famously described in Thomas Jefferson's last letter: "All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man."¹⁰

One might wonder in what measure this abstract goal of promoting the light of science resonated with most Americans. A more important and compelling source of the founders' idea of mission, which is far less theoretical, appears in the greatest work of American political thought, *The Federalist*, and announces a central theme of that work: "It seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice" (Carey and McClellan 2001, 1). This justification of the mission begins from an analysis of the historical situation and of where America is to be placed in the destiny of the age. *The Federalist's* argument is that much depends on what is decided and what happens in America. This argument is a sober echo of Thomas Paine's exuberant encomium to the American Revolution: "Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected, even to the end of time, by the proceedings now" (1776).

9. See Sandoz (1990). Some sermons before and during the war stressed this theme, as in Abraham Keltas's stirring plea in 1777: "we have reason to conclude that the cause of this American continent, against the measures of a cruel, bloody, and vindictive ministry, is the cause of God. We are contending for the rights of mankind, for the welfare of millions now living, and for the happiness of millions yet unborn" (595). For a discussion of the importance of sacred history in the revolutionary period, see Bloch (1988) and Guyatt (2007).

10. Thomas Jefferson, letter to Roger Weightman, June 24, 1826 (<http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/P/tj3/writings/brf/jefl288.htm>).

To convert the founders act of political analysis into a veritable mission, however, another step was required. Americans had not only to appreciate the momentousness of what was at stake; they had to assume a responsibility for trying to influence the outcome (“to decide the question”). *The Federalist* appeals to Americans’ reason and understanding of the situation, to their commendable wish for honor and glory, and above all to their magnanimity in pursuing a “noble course” that might benefit “the whole human race.” It asks Americans to pay homage and to support the leaders of the Revolution who “reared the fabrics of government that have no model on the face of the globe” (Carey and McClellan 2001, 67).

The mission that is outlined in *The Federalist* falls into the realm of political, not sacred, history. Its object is a political good, not a religious one. Its aim is to secure liberty inside a republican form of government, which can be an example to the world. This said, there is no necessary conflict between the founders’ goal and the goal of some of the religious thinkers—indeed, both positions could have been (and were) held simultaneously by some of the same individuals. But the two missions are nonetheless distinct.

One final point about the founders’ idea of a mission must be noted. Their position derived from a political form of reasoning, and it accordingly left open the question of the manner in which this objective would be pursued. Attempts by some historians to connect the founders’ idea to a particular kind of policy, whether exemplary or by use of more forceful means, serves only to confuse the meaning of the mission.¹¹ By the nature of the case, prudential judgments cannot be fixed in advance but must be determined by considering America’s power and resources and the conditions prevailing in the world.

Turning to the nineteenth century, the first critical moment when the idea of the mission influenced the conduct of foreign policy was the period of manifest destiny. Manifest destiny refers to a political program, popularized from the 1830s through the 1850s, to acquire more territory on the American continent on which to implant democracy and open the door for massive European immigration. What might sound like a mere land grab was in fact animated by a great idea. It was the idea of progress. Manifest destiny was championed by a group of intellectuals and political leaders, mostly Democrats, in a movement known as Young America. Among its leading figures were John L. O’Sullivan, editor of the *Democratic Review* who apparently coined this term “manifest destiny”; Stephen Douglas; and Walt Whitman. Looming

11. See McDougall (1997), 20–38. McDougall chooses to link the founders’ view of exceptionalism—which he then defines as exceptionalism—to a foreign policy of restraint, contrasting it to the views found in the policies of manifest destiny and imperialism.

over them all, as the intellectual godfather of the movement, was George Bancroft, America's premier historian and author of the 12-volume classic *History of the United States*. With his *History's* epigraph, "Westward the star of empire takes its way" (adapted from Bishop Berkeley), Bancroft was first to articulate the basic theory of progress for the Democratic Party.

Bancroft did his advanced studies in Germany from 1818 to 1822, where he took courses from two of the great minds of the period, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Georg W. F. Hegel. Hegel's ideas were already exercising an enormous influence on thinking in Germany, and Bancroft returned to develop an American version of philosophy of history. Its premise, fully in accord with the Hegelian idea of history, is that at any point in time there is a civilization or nation that is commissioned by the movement of history to bring into being the next chapter in the development of the spirit. The movement of spirit is forward-looking or progressive. The historian's task, as Bancroft explained it, is to discern the place events "occupy in the progress of humanity, ... and when history is viewed from this point, it is found that humanism is steadily advancing, that the advance of liberty and justice is certain" (Nye 1944, 100). In Bancroft's adaptation of this thesis, the next—and perhaps final—chapter in the movement of world history was the age of democracy. America was the nation commissioned to bring democracy to the world.

O'Sullivan echoed these same ideas in the movement's new journal, the *Democratic Review*: "The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. ... We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march?" (6 [1839]: 426–28; cited in Widmer 1999, 43). Walt Whitman was also, early on, a participant in the movement. Long before his great "exceptionalist" essay *Democratic Vistas* (1871), he was invoking the idea of the mission in support of American expansionism. He did so in the context of the Mexican-American War, using the category of "race," which was already frequently employed in Hegelian thought (referring often to peoples): "What has miserable, inefficient Mexico—with her superstition, her burlesque upon freedom, her actual tyranny by the few over the many—what has she to do with the great mission of peopling the world with a noble race? Be it ours, to achieve that mission!"¹²

The progenitors' idea of progress at the heart of manifest destiny often made use of religious language. O'Sullivan, for example, knew well that "the reminiscence of Puritanism was the most powerful element of that spirit which produced the Revolution"; his God talk seemed clearly to have been

12. Walt Whitman, from "The Brooklyn Eagle," cited in Howe (2009), 769.

deployed mostly as a rhetorical strategy (*Democratic Review* 3 [1838]: 262). More important was the blending of philosophy and religion that became the hallmark of this era. It is likely that Hegel himself intended such a fusion—or confusion—of the two realms, arguing that his system provided a rational account of God’s providential plan. In more general terms, philosophy and religion become one: “Philosophy, in explaining religion, is only explaining itself, and in explaining itself it explains religion. ... Thus religion and philosophy coincide.”¹³ Following this general idea, one finds in Bancroft’s work the themes of progress, reason, chosenness, democracy, and divine will bundled together into the same rhetorical package. As Bancroft wrote, “Thus it is that the voice of the people is the voice of pure Reason. ... Give power to the whole people and you get the nearest expression of the law of God, the voice of conscience, the oracle of universal reason.” Or again: “The tendency of democratic truth is to inspire not only a confidence in itself, but a confidence in its success. We believe in democratic truth, and we believe in the overruling providence of God.”¹⁴ O’Sullivan, who was known as a freethinker in religion, wrote regularly in the same vein: “The source of the democratic principle is essential love and essential truth. ... It is not therefore *man* in which democracy puts their trust, for this does aristocracy, but God” (*Democratic Review* 8 [September 1840]: 361; *Democratic Review* 6 [September 1839]: 216).¹⁵

It is beyond my purpose here to adjudicate theological claims of what is truly Christian and what is not. Such an exercise is in any case difficult since philosophy and religion have been interacting with each other from the dawn of the Christian era. Yet any account of manifest destiny should at least take note of the strong philosophical provenance of its basic ideas. While echoes of Puritan themes can readily be found, manifest destiny, in the degree that it can be considered a religious doctrine, is more properly placed in the strand of “liberal Protestantism” rather than traditional Christianity. (“Liberal Protestantism” is a technical term of theology that has been defined, for the nineteenth century, as an attempt “to bring Christian thought into organic

13. Georg W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Religion*, cited in Barth (1959), 395.

14. George Bancroft, “Oration of February 18, 1840” at Hartford, CT (pamphlet).

15. Edwin Widmer describes O’Sullivan and the other leaders of the movement as “free thinkers” (1999, 40). Herman Melville was also associated with Young America, and his early thought approved of its position, although he soon turned against. In *White-Jacket*, he offers one of the purest expressions, at a critical distance, of the religious-based mission: “We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear. We are pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours” (1850, chap. 36).

unity with the evolutionary world view, the movements for social reconstruction, and the expectations of ‘a better world’ which dominated the general mind”;¹⁶ its originator or most important spokesperson by most accounts was none other than one of Bancroft’s teachers, Friedrich Schleiermacher.) It was the more orthodox or traditional believers who tended to object to the idea of a nation commissioned by God to play a direct political role. The theology of Walt Whitman makes this point: How often are Whitman’s religious ideas taken to be an exemplar of an orthodox or scriptural form of religious thought? Yet when it comes to proving the religious basis of American exceptionalism, suddenly Whitman’s “God talk” is trotted out to prove the point.

What is true of manifest destiny is truer still of the period often dubbed the era of imperialism, at the end of the nineteenth century. Well before Albert Beveridge delivered his defense of the Spanish-American War in the name of God’s mission, others were preparing the ground. The roots of this supposed divine injunction demand examination. Its most prominent spokesperson was Josiah Strong, a leading clergyman of the era and author of the best seller *Our Country* (1885). A frequently cited passage from that work provides the content and flavor of Strong’s understanding of the mission:

It seems to me that God, with infinite wisdom and skill, is training the Anglo-Saxon race for an hour sure to come in the world’s future. ... The time is coming when ... the world [will] enter upon a new stage of its history—the *final competition of races, for which the Anglo-Saxon is being schooled*. Long before the thousand millions are here, the mighty *centrifugal* tendency, inherent in this stock and strengthened in the United States, will assert itself. Then this race of unequalled energy, with all the majesty of numbers and the might of wealth behind it—the representative, let us hope, of the largest liberty, the purest Christianity, the highest civilization—having developed peculiarly aggressive traits calculated to impress its institutions upon mankind, will spread itself over the earth. ... And can any one doubt that the results of this competition of races will be the “survival of the fittest?” (174)

No great mastery of intellectual history is needed to notice that the architecture of Strong’s argument derives directly from Darwinian thought. The struggle for dominance, in this case among collectivities (often designated

16. This definition is given by Daniel Day Williams, as cited in Eisenach (2008), 5. Eisenach’s paper provides an excellent survey of the connection between liberal theology and some of the major Progressive thinkers.

as “races”), was a major theme in the application of biology to politics, which was commonplace in American thought at the time. Much of this thought was loose and based on rough analogies. But in this case, Darwin himself expressed similar arguments when explaining how “natural selection” had contributed to “the progress of civilization” in the Europeans’ dealing with the Turks: “what an endless number of the lower races will have been eliminated by the higher civilized races throughout the world” (cited in Himmelfarb 1968, 319). Nothing in this line of thought, obviously, derives from scripture. It is all science. Long before Strong’s gloss of a divine command was added to the idea of mission, it had been sanctified by the only nineteenth-century “prophet” who mattered to the political thought of the American mission: Charles Darwin.

Strong’s theology represents another example of “liberal Protestantism,” known in this case by the name of the Social Gospel Movement. Strong was one of the originators of the Social Gospel, which was a forerunner of Progressivism. The Social Gospel taught a version of Christianity in tune with the enlightened thought of the day and the tenets of modern science. Its proponents stressed the social nature of sin, arguing that the Kingdom of God would be achieved, in part at least, through the amelioration of the social conditions in this world. The engagement of the Anglo-Saxon in the task of improving the lower races was a integral part of this program. It was the more fundamentalist religious elements that counseled against a theology that identified the achievement of the kingdom with collective political action.¹⁷

Judging from these two nineteenth-century cases, exponents of the dominant view of the mission seem to have gotten matters backward. They ascribe the alleged excesses of manifest destiny and imperialism—I set aside here consideration of the merits of the actual policies—to religion, leaving the further impression that the character of religion is of a fundamentalist or scriptural-based kind. In fact, the deepest source of these conceptions of the mission is found not in religion but in philosophy and science. Religion has been asked to pay for the sins of rationalist thought, in the form of Hegelianism or Darwinism, and within religious thought, traditional religious beliefs have been asked to pay for the sins of liberal theology.

This survey of the idea of a mission before World War I is not meant to fix a single pattern for the relation of religious thought to the American idea of

17. At the time of the Spanish-American War, most Protestants were favorable to expansionism, although the chief spokesmen were, like Josiah Strong, from the liberal theological camp. The precursors of fundamentalism, however, were beginning by the second decade of the twentieth century to entertain strong doubts about the notion of a political mission in world affairs. See Handy (2007), 241.

mission. Just the contrary. The lesson to be drawn from all of the cases is that each expression of the mission must be studied individually to observe its content. Invoking God is no doubt a common refrain, but this observation is quite different from saying that religious thought, let alone Puritan religious thought, has been the main source in every expression of the mission. There is no one idea of the American mission, and it is probably more appropriate to speak of missions. Statements of mission have had different forms—some almost purely religious, others political—and the political forms have had different justifications, religious and nonreligious. Given this range and variety, it is foolish to condemn the idea of mission as such. The merits of each of the different ideas of mission vary, with one or more of them very likely offering a positive or helpful approach. Making such assessments, which is no easy matter, must rest on considerations of the reasonableness of the mission in each instance, of what it contributes to the good of the nation and the good of the world.

It may be instructive here, as it so often is, to return to the founders' thought in *The Federalist*. In contrast to the nineteenth-century views of the mission, which take their bearings from modes of thought that begin from outside of politics (philosophy of history and natural science), the founders rooted their idea of the mission in concrete political analysis. Their notion is fully comprehensible in the context of a "practical" account of international relations. Indeed, *The Federalist* is so reputed for its sober understanding of international affairs that it was one of the inspirations for the originator of the realist school of thought, Hans Morgenthau (Morgenthau 1951, 3–39; Morgenthau and Thompson 1993, 185). Still, for all of the founders' sobriety, they were not "realists" according to the modern understanding. They articulated a concept of mission, one that asked Americans to consider more than mere interest and to take account of America's singular place in shaping the destiny of our age. Their idea of a mission was so far from being fanciful that it has the character now of a historical fact. The American Revolution and the founding, coupled with America's embracing a mission for liberty, have changed the course of the modern world in a way as momentous as the founders suspected it might. To ignore or deny this fact is to close one's eyes utterly to reality.

RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN MISSION

A reader too much in search of a "message" might at this point charge that I have attempted to fix matters, in the guise of a historical narrative, to support a rationalist political scientist's view of the cosmos. All the potential problems of religion and politics have been resolved by denying that religious thought

has had a substantial influence in the political realm. “God’s in heaven, all’s right in the world.” If this impression has been left, it is time now to refocus the account.

To show that the role of religion in shaping America’s political mission is much less than most interpreters have supposed is a far cry from arguing that religion has been unimportant. Although many accounts of sacred history have sought to avoid becoming enmeshed in ordinary political matters, even some of the most prudent and reserved interpretations have concluded that, at certain moments and on certain issues, the religious and nonreligious realms cross paths. Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address, perhaps the greatest of all American speeches, works from just this premise: “If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences 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, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him?” America’s legal system may go a long way toward separating church and state, but American political thought has never fully separated religion and politics.¹⁸

Q6

In the end, there is no way to avoid acknowledging the existence of a theological-political “question”—one need not say “problem”—inside American political life. Political science is accordingly obliged to consider the role of the religious dimension of the American mission. A striking fact about the contemporary scene is the number of thinkers, both secular and religious, who oppose, whether actively or by their silence, any notion of an American religious mission. The case against the mission rests on four arguments. First, any notion of a divine mission involving a single nation is said to be idolatrous and against the religious-humanist idea of the universality of mankind. God does not speak through a particular people or nation. Second, liberal democracy in its advanced and truest form should conduct its affairs on the basis of “public reason.” All expressions of religious ideas or sentiments should be banned from the public square. Third, faith is expressed genuinely only when it is divorced from anything political: “the most real things in the world are the shadows of an unseen world that knows us by name. ... Sustained involvement in America’s political culture serves mainly to corrupt” (Heclo 2007,

18. As Jean Bethke Elshtain has remarked, “Religion and politics flow back and forth in American civil society all the time—always have, always will. How could it be otherwise?” (2000, 101). Commenting on Lincoln’s second inaugural address, David Gelernter recently remarked: “In America religion *must* be political *is in fact* political; in America, religion concerns the citizen *and* the city” (2007, 141).

143).¹⁹ Fourth, the idea of a religious mission is rapidly losing credibility. It is a relic of an older theology that is best left to follow its current course of fading away.

These arguments, some religious, others philosophical, represent a powerful challenge to the traditional idea of a religious mission. But each may be questioned.

(1) The “theological” charge of idolatry, for all of its self-assuredness, rests on a “theological” claim of its own. It both accuses and convicts generations of believers, beginning with the Puritans, of heresy. It is quite true that a number of Catholics have expressed reservations at the “Protestant” idea of a particular people, rather than the universal church, serving as God’s agent, and some Jews have wondered at the improbability of being chosen not once but twice. But against all these objections is the possibility that the Almighty has his own purposes. Nor does the oft-repeated rebuttal—that other nations have at times also declared themselves to be God’s special agent—disprove America’s special status. It might only show that the other nations have been in error, which could be why most of them have long since abandoned the claim.

(2) The philosophical argument for banning references to religion in the public square has begun to collapse of its own weight. While many religious leaders now appear to acknowledge that direct appeals to religious themes should be used sparingly in a pluralist liberal system, in part because they can prove to be off-putting, this adjustment to conditions is hardly the same as a principle of exclusion of religion from public life. By whose authority, it may be asked, has such a proclamation been decreed? With practice so much at odds from this “ideal,” at least in America, many express puzzlement at how a supposedly practical philosophical project of this kind could ever have been implemented.

The more important point, however, has been the abandonment of this argument by its two most prominent champions: John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. Rarely, in fact, does philosophy present so dramatic a case of reversal on so fundamental a question. Looking back, it appears that reminders of the historical cases of Martin Luther King, the abolitionists, and Abraham Lincoln were enough to send John Rawls back to the drawing board. If the religious discourse in these instances did so much to contribute to America’s good, on what basis could a total exclusion of religious discourse be justified? Embedded deeply in one of his many footnotes, Rawls

19. Hecló is characterizing the position that he calls “separatism,” which is best expressed today in the writings of Stanley Hauerwas (1991).

even goes so far as to concede that “religious doctrines clearly underlie King’s views and are important in his appeals” (Rawls 1993, 250).²⁰ Jürgen Habermas, while focusing more on Europe than America, has now followed a similar path of philosophical repentance.²¹ On the broader question of the character of liberal democracy, no one has offered a definitive reason for why this regime form must be entirely scrubbed of religious influence. Unless one assumes what one seeks to prove, there seems to be no reason why a majority, acting within the limits of liberal democratic principles, may not seek to encourage religious ends or sustain a religious culture. A long tradition of American thought has insisted that the maintenance of a religious culture, whatever its benefits to religion, is essential for the political good. A nation does not have to debiblicize to prove that it is liberal.

(3) The “separatist” position, arguing on religious grounds that faith is divorced from political affairs, has won renewed support in some quarters, in part, it seems, in reaction against what some deemed to be the excesses of the Christian right. Religion, in this view, had become too bound to politics and had allowed the churches to serve partisan political ends. Directed against certain fundamentalist churches, separatists hearkened back to an older fundamentalist position, prevalent throughout much of the twentieth century, when most fundamentalists had withdrawn from active political participation in the name of religious values. Yet very few of the religious would seem to deny in principle that certain historical events, because of their magnitude and implications, could have significance for God’s plan.

(4) Finally, the claim that “mission thought” is outmoded is one of those comforting ideas that allows detractors to dismiss the idea without the need to engage it. “History” does all the work for them. Yet if one point in the sociology of religion has become clear over the past 30 years, it is that “history” has proven to be less well behaved than scholars believed. Suddenly, the confident prognostications of a secularizing world have given way to counterarguments of desecularization (see esp. Berger 1999). In the United States in particular, there has been a revival in the strength of religious faith and practice, even as the number of declared secularists has also increased. Society has become more religiously polarized. At least some part of the faithful has reconnected with the idea of an American religious mission, somehow conceived. Furthermore, as the political dimension of this idea has sometimes been presented, it hardly fits the parochial image that has often

20. For Rawls’s (1993) discussion of his new willingness to allow religious discourse, see 247–54.

21. Habermas’s transformation is discussed and analyzed in Portier (2011).

been depicted. On the contrary, it has been conceived as a mission that stretched from its particular agent to humanity as a whole. This idea was expressed, for example, in President George W. Bush's much maligned address to the National Endowment for Democracy: "We believe that freedom—the freedom we prize—is not for us alone, it is the right and capacity of all mankind."²²

While it lies beyond the province of political science to judge the theological arguments in these debates, political analysts can claim competence in those areas where religious concerns and politics intersect. It is regrettable that so many secular thinkers today labor under the misconception that those of faith have no interest in working out the meaning of the mission with the aid of political analysis. While this holds true of a few denominations, religious thinkers over the course of American history have often sought guidance from political science, revising and refining their understanding of the American mission in light of changing world conditions. Their thinking not only profited from this analysis, but they in turn have sometimes helped to improve political science by adding insights derived from religious themes. How else can one account for the depth of the contribution of religious thinkers like Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr? One of the more ill-conceived caricatures of the secular mind is the view that religious thought, because of its anchor in faith, does not alter, or progress, as time moves on.

Faith and reason in the final analysis are different, yet to insist that they are antagonistic across the board is untrue. It is clearly not contrary to reason, for example, to have seen in the cold war a struggle not just over political theories but also over religious faith. Communism is godless; the liberal democracies of that era were not. The mobilization against communism, which owed much to those in America who believed in a religious mission, can reasonably be judged to have helped save biblical faith in the world. Whether this fact merits a place in God's divine plan is not for the political scientist to say, but it would trivialize political science—and divorce it from reality—to ignore the religious stakes that were involved in this conflict.²³ It is likewise not beyond the bounds of reason to speculate today on America's special role in the defense of biblical faith. Religion, on a certain view, is not disembodied from its physical home in the world, nor is its fate wholly divorced from considerations of earthly power. With biblical faith in decline across Europe, its survival may

22. George W. Bush, address to the National Endowment for Democracy, November 6, 2003 (<http://www.ned.org/george-w-bush/remarks-by-president-george-w-bush-at-the-20th-anniversary>).

23. For an in-depth treatment of the role of religious thought and religious leaders in influencing policy during the cold war, see Inboden (2008).

owe much to what takes place in this nation, which at times has seen fit to extend an outstretched arm to the persecuted and to offer protection with its mighty hand. Are such thoughts, which believers in a living God might see as germane to the divine plan, unrelated to the tasks of justice and nobility that philosophy and political analysis have asked this nation to perform?

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