



THE AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE CIVIL RELIGION

SUM UP

This paper focuses on the links between two important concepts that are part of the United States' history and Constitution. They used to influence throughout centuries the American way of life, the American policies, the American society... Here is described and told how these influences worked and whether or not these concepts still exist in the 21st century's America.

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Religious Communities

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INTRODUCTION

The term “religion” comes from two Latin words, *religare* and *religere*. The first one means the social function of religion meaning “to link” people as a community, a society in which they share the same beliefs and convictions. The second one refers to the idea of collecting things. Indeed, religion is about historical process and founding texts (the Bible, the Torah, the Koran...). Each religion as special rules or way of life that are imposed to people who practice it. In this paper, we are focusing on a specific religion who composes the United States since their beginning.

The civil religion, first described by Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, is a “purely civil profession of faith of which the Sovereignty should fix the articles, not exactly as religious dogmas, but as social sentiments without which a man cannot be a foot citizen or a faithful subject”. This concept gathers a set of beliefs, symbols and rituals, all linked directly with American institutions (such as the investiture of a President). It helps to understand the legitimacy and the place of religion even at the highest level of the State.

Next to it exists another historical notion which is the American exceptionalism. It is a perception that American people have about themselves as being part of a society qualitatively superior to others, because of its origin, its history and its political and religious institutions. For the first time conceptualized by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831, this notion gives to the United States a special place in the world, giving to humanity opportunities and hopes thanks to the ideas expressed in their Constitution.

Thanks to a historical approach, we are going to see to what extent these two concepts can be linked together, explaining some American political and strategical choices throughout the years.

FIRST PART: ORIGIN, SET UP AND EVOLUTION OF EXCEPTIONALISM

THE PURITAN'S INPUT

In the beginning of the XVII century, North America is still a virgin continent, for lots of Europeans. Everything shifts brutally because of religious divergences in Europe around 1610. Dissidents decide to leave this unstable and dangerous place to live freely their faith. They migrated to America, guided by God, to found a new world called "New Jerusalem". Despite hardships due to this big change, the religious spirit remained strong and helped them to overcome any difficulties. Historically, the very first implantation of people in America are religious-motivated ones. These persecuted Puritans founded a new country where religious and politics are strongly linked together.

These migrations are not hazardous. John O'Sullivan talk about the "Manifest Destiny", presenting the American people as chosen by God and having a mission: to spread to the world ideas and way of life models. Indeed, this divine mission was an earthly incarnation of God's will. In 1630, within the Massachusetts Bay colony, Governor John Winthrop qualified the colony of a "City upon the Hill". This metaphor sketched the community above the world, on its hill, as a model to follow. As George Bush said it three hundred years later, this quote suggests that the United States is like a lighthouse of liberty and democracy. "People can turn toward us, learn from us and imitate us". That is where the American exceptionalism and the civil religion find their respective origins.

THE MONROE DOCTRINE AND THE CIVIL WAR

On December 2nd, 1823 the fifth President of the young United States, James Monroe set up a doctrine in his name which will edict the U.S. Diplomacy rules for almost one century. This doctrine forbid the American to intervene in Europe affairs, and in return European countries had no longer possibility to colonize South American lands. Due to this new rule, the United States remained neutral in world affairs. Even if the American exceptionalism existed at that period, it couldn't impact the world and the United States built itself, away from the world problems.

The Civil War (1861-1865) is a central element in the evolution and the construction of the American civil religion and the American exceptionalism. It helped to build a strong and powerful state, capable of resisting intern troubles such as the worst (a civil war for instance), and to legitimate its role of model and democratic power to follow.

One of the most significant moment of the impact of the Civil War on the United States history is during the Lincoln's Gettysburg Address¹. For him, what was the most important was not to save the Union for the good of America but for what America represented in the world, to not lose their role of model. In other words, the exceptionalism had to be preserved and for that, the Union had to be saved.

Historically, the Civil War, called "the heart of the American history" by Sidney Mead, was a main event where the national identity, cornerstone of the young nation, was obliged to rethink itself. After that, the United State identity and role changed forever.

¹ The Gettysburg Address is one of the most famous speech in American history, delivered by President Lincoln during Civil War in the afternoon of Thursday, November 19, 1863 at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery.

SECOND PART: THE 20TH CENTURY AND A SET OF CHANGES FOR AMERICA

THE INTERVENTIONISM AFTER WORLD WAR I: THE REAL BORN OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

The American exceptionalism really developed and spread itself throughout the 20th century. The amount of events helped the United States to become what they are, represent now, and forged their policies.

In all the main events that happened during the last century, some are very important by their consequences on the exceptionalism. Indeed, the United States took a brutal watershed in their involvement in the world affairs right after their war against Spain in 1898. Now the American power is established, the conquest of the continent is over and the Frontier has disappeared. The world is in the hands of great powers. At that time, the Monroe Doctrine is questioned. On December 6th, 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt highlights the consequences of this doctrine and advocates a shift in his famous corollary², due to the world's change and because a more confident United States was willing to take on the role of regional policeman. This shift concerns the American involvement in world affairs, and wants the U.S. to become a great and interventionist power. The American exceptionalism, which now wants to be expressed out of the frontiers, has never been more clearly explained than by the Secretary of War Elihu Root who, in 1899, declared: "The American soldier is different from all the soldiers of the world. He is the avant-garde of liberty, justice, law and order, peace and happiness."

With this main political shift the U.S. authorizes themselves to intervene in world affairs. Nevertheless, their involvement in World War I is two-edged, as Wilson said in 1918 during his speech to congress on February 11³.

The Second World War arrives and with it the U.S. imposes itself as a major and necessary power in the resolution of the conflict, as they did in World War I. In August 12th, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed with Churchill the Atlantic Chart which condemns the Axe's forces. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 etched the real beginning of the United States in the world affairs. Main actors of the victory and the resolution of World War II, their legitimacy allowed them to reorganize the world after 1945 by the Yalta Conference⁴. Right after this moment, they reorganized the world, started to lead it and became chief of the free-world. Through this new role, their exceptionalism is fully expressed.

² This corollary states that the United States will intervene in conflict between European countries and Latin American countries to enforce legitimate claims of European powers, rather than having the Europeans press their claims directly.

³ "The United States has no desire to interfere in European affairs or to act as arbiter in European territorial disputes. [...] She entered this war because she was made a partner, whether she would not, in the sufferings and indignities inflicted by the military master of Germany against the peace and security of mankind."

⁴ The Yalta Conference happens in 1945 with the meeting of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin to prepare the post-war world. With it, the United States impose themselves as future leader of the world. It is an important moment in the evolution of their diplomacy and their expression of their exceptionalism.

In 1945, Henry Luce, a magazine magnate – Time, Life, Fortune, etc. – declared that the century to come would be the “American Century”⁵. Almost immediately after the end of World War II, the United States entered in oil regions of Middle-East via specific agreements with Saudi Arabia. They established military bases in Japan, Korea, Philippines and lots of Pacific Islands. War in Korea⁶ was lead less than five years after the end of World War II, showing how quick the United States shifted their policy. During the following decades, they orchestrated coups in Iran, Guatemala, and Chile and brought military help to diverse dictatorship in Caribbean. Later, they invaded Vietnam and bombed Laos and Cambodia. The existence of the Soviet Union with the nuclear weapon increased their motivation. Actually, the threat of the “global communism” gave to the United States a powerful justification to their expansion, and soon they had military bases in hundreds of countries. The U.S. were the only one capable of blocking the Soviets’ world conquest. They became chief of this opposition because the communism opposes and threatens American principles. These principles are component of their history and exceptionalism. Indeed the communism imposes atheism, totalitarianism, and anti-liberalism while American believe in religion, importance of God, democracy and capitalism. The USSR is opposed to what the U.S. try to spread. These divergences forced them to impose quicker and further their model: democratization, way of life and way of consumption, culture... Little by little the exceptionalism loses its religious side and becomes more and more a willpower of universalization. It keeps a religious dimension in that the very first role of religion is to convert non-converts and to create a community. In some ways, if the soft conversion does not work, the religion can impose it – the struggle against communism embodies this hard type of conversion.

SEPTEMBER 11: WHAT IS EXCEPTIONALISM NOWADAYS?

The 9/11 events represent another major crisis in American history that revealed how far its exceptionalism can go and to what extend civil religion can be used as a mean to achieve wills.

These horrible attacks gave a renewal to the idea that the United States were the only one responsible for world security, defending its allies against terrorism as they used to do in the past against communism. They were the target because someone were opposed to their exceptionalism, to what they embodied and tried to expand.

Moreover, President G. W. Bush pushed the exceptionalism idea till its extreme limits highlighting the unilateral war. On his Address to the Nation the evening of the attacks, he clearly recalled that “Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack”. And “America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining.”⁷

⁵ He added: “The victory of the U.S. on the last war gave us the right to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit”.

⁶ The Korea War (1950-1953) opposed the North of Korea (helped by the Soviet Union) to the South (helped by the United Nations with the U.S. as leader). It was the first main conflict which involved the U.S. after the end of WWII.

⁷ Another quote from G. W. Bush that night embodies clearly the exceptionalism: “If America shows weakness and uncertainty, the world will drift towards tragedy. That will not happen on my watch”.

Facing 9/11, American people gathered together under the national flag and Biblical God. The cause of Iraq war for the United States deeply related to the cause of founding the nation. American people believe that the mission is to establish the human rights for all people of the world. The American Civil Religion has justified this American sense of mission.

Around March 2003, the U.S. mass media started to point out the religious beliefs behind the actions of President Bush. Stephen Mansfield published "The Faith of George W. Bush" in 2003, emphasizing the influence of the President's faith on his policy-making. With the Second Gulf War with Iraq in 2003, the American exceptionalism has reached a new watershed. Exceptionalism strategy became America's dominant response to these attacks. It is more accurate when Bush speaks about a "crusade [to lead] against terrorism"⁸. The religion reference is used in order to justify any military action as a mean to protect what the exceptionalism has for most precious.

CONCLUSION AND OPENING

How is this today? First the American Civil Religion is still alive: since the attacks, flags have been set on doors and the song "God Bless America" has never been so popular since Pearl Harbor. The exceptionalism has been laicized and henceforth touches military, religious and patriotic fields. These values find their direct origin in the Founding Fathers: strict moral, wealthy as sign of divine reward, vision of the society as model for the world, importance of religion in life...

Nevertheless, in 2008, Barack Obama was elected and operated an important shift in the American foreign policy compared to what G. W. Bush used to do. The interventionism decreased – he called back for instance military troops in Afghanistan. Does he still embody the exceptional character of the country he is leading? According to a poll, for 58% of American, Obama believes "in the American unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world". Still according to this poll, for 74% of American, Bush believed in this unique character.⁹

That is why we could ask some questions about the existence or the feeling nowadays of a real exceptional role. To the question "Because of the United States' history and its Constitution, do you think the U.S. has a unique character that makes it the greatest

⁸ In an interview given to American TV on September 17th, 2001.

⁹ GALLUP POLL/USA TODAY conducted on 10-12 December 2010. 1,019 adults interrogated living in the continental U.S. For the paper, two questions have been retained: "Do you think [Barack Obama believes / George W. Bush believes] the U.S. has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world, or not?" The second is: "Because of the United States' history and its Constitution, do you think the U.S. has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world, or don't you think so?"

country in the world, or don't you think so?" 80% of them answered that Yes, the U.S. has a unique character.

Hence, the exceptionalism is still alive and asked for. Indeed in the current terrorist attack that the world is living, lots of countries are waiting for a strong American response to these issues as they used to do in the past. Recently, Obama rejected a proposal for coalition against ISIS¹⁰. We can ask about the consequences of a decreasing of the interventionism - which is a military incarnation of exceptionalism -, on the world security.

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