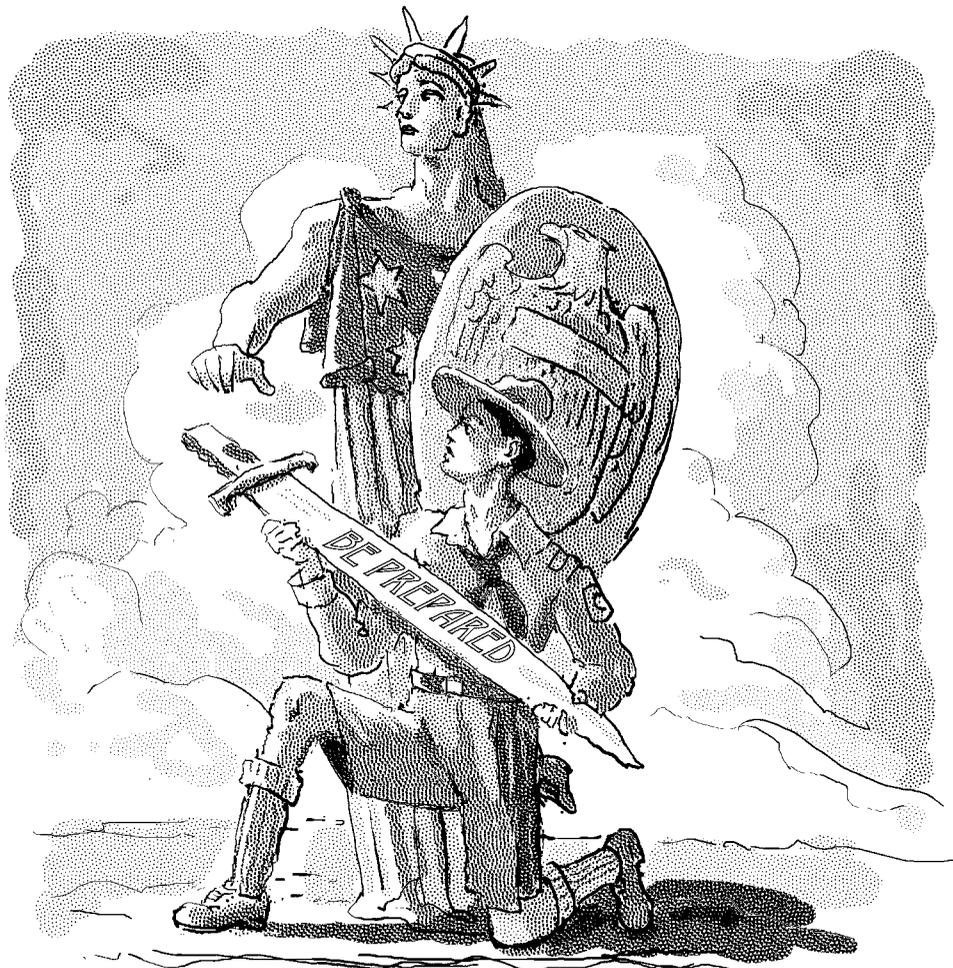


Book Review by David P. Goldman

NEITHER AMERICAN, NOR CIVIL, NOR A RELIGION

The Tragedy of American Foreign Policy: How America's Civil Religion Betrayed the National Interest,
by Walter McDougall. Yale University Press, 424 pages, \$30



Drawing based on *Saturday Evening Post* cover art of March 2, 1918

ALL BUT ABSENT FROM MAINSTREAM political philosophy is discussion of the state and the sacred. The American Constitution's moral authority, formidable and longstanding, makes us forget how radically the United States, in creating a state with neither monarch nor official church, departed from the precedents that had prevailed for millennia around the world. We tend to think of natural right rather than divine injunction. Yet with an ambiguity that cannot be inadvertent, the Declaration of Independence invoked "Nature and Nature's God." We find this ambiguity in our greatest political figures. The prophetic tone of Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural differs so profoundly from his previous speeches that Richard Brookhiser concluded that Lincoln must have had a religious conversion in the White House.

Political scientist Joshua Mitchell observes that Thomas Hobbes accused Catholics of

placing sovereignty above the state, and Presbyterians of assigning it to individual conscience, below the state. This dichotomy led to England's civil war, Hobbes believed, an important reason why he proposed a sovereign state independent of religion.

America's secularism, though, is quite distinct from Hobbes's. The radical Protestants who founded the New England colonies drew from *sola scriptura* the belief that God is revealed individually to every reader of the Bible. Split eventually among dozens of denominations, they inevitably abhorred the idea of a state church. A nation of Bible readers was a holy people requiring neither priestly mediation nor an anointed monarch.

WALTER MCDUGALL'S NEW BOOK attacks the problem from the other direction, asserting there is indeed an American religion, but that it has been a

malignant influence responsible for serial foreign policy blunders, and should be extirpated from American civic life. A Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and professor of international relations at the University of Pennsylvania, McDougall contends that this civil religion began with the Puritan fathers' Calvinist exceptionalism, then transmogrified into Woodrow Wilson and George W. Bush's world-bettering idealism. Not least of the many facts this thesis can't explain is the periodic reawakening of America's individualistic, antinomian, Biblical religious impulse, often when least expected. The ascendance of evangelical Protestantism at the expense of the mainline denominations a generation ago is one instance, as is—in an indirect way—the movement that swept Donald Trump to the presidency.

Despite distortions and overstatements, McDougall has done us a great service by asking students of political philosophy to wrestle



with questions about the state and the sacred. He stresses the continuity of our civil religion from the founding through George W. Bush's Second Inaugural Address, despite a great shift from what he calls "classic" to "progressive" civil religion. He claims that Walter Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel, or the Mainline Protestantism of Harry Emerson Fosdick, is the lineal successor of the Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards and, arguably, Lincoln. McDougall is keenly aware that the change in Christian emphasis from individual salvation to world betterment did not take hold in the United States until the turn of the 20th century, when Americans first began to contemplate an interventionist foreign policy. One might well regard the Social Gospel as a heretical turn away from the religion of America's founding, but McDougall sees a fundamental continuity. Rauschenbusch and Wilson espoused an "updated version of Progressive civil religion," not a different religion altogether.

MCDUGALL ADOPTS THE TERM "American Civil Religion" from Robert Bellah, who in 1967, McDougall explains, "discovered a previously unspoken truth. The United States was not only what G.K. Chesterton had called a nation with the soul of a church, but was also the living embodiment of American Civil Religion (ACR)." This civil religion includes "the Founders' faith in a Providential United States, Lincoln's faith in an almost chosen people, and the ritualistic invocations of God in presidential inaugurals," especially John F. Kennedy's. ACR derives from the "God-affirming English civil religion that was painfully crafted over 175 years of Tudor-Stuart history." The English

baptized themselves a new chosen people in the vanguard of human progress.... Generations of mostly Anglo-Protestant migrants carried those spirits to America.... The Calvinist non-conformists who peopled New England after 1630, far from being some kind of proto-Americans, were in fact uncomfortable participants in that British imperial project.

The Whiggish optimism of the American Founding, in this reading, gives rise to the naïve faith that America can remake the world in its own image, and a baleful propensity to charge off on crusades, notably the global War on Terror. But what's the alternative? "Rather than stoically but confidently absorbing the attack [on the Twin Towers] as a virulent, but ultimately futile, protest against globalization,"

McDougall writes, "Americans apparently went berserk. Thus did the posture of sole superpower evolve over a single decade from Bush 41's cautious assertion to Clinton's casual assumption to Bush 43's caustic aggression."

IT WOULD BE EASY TO DISMISS *THE TRAGEDY OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY* as a defeatist screed. A small number of fanatics can disrupt a modern society, and a "stoic" response to 9/11 might have encouraged far more lethal and destructive attacks—many but not necessarily all of which would have proven ultimately futile. One can deplore George W. Bush's nation-building overreach without concluding that the proper course of action was no action at all. But this is only a passing distraction from McDougall's main argument.

As history, McDougall's thesis is problematic. As theology, it's simply wrong. The Progressive "civil religion" of Walter Rauschenbusch was neither American, nor civil, nor a religion. Rauschenbusch adapted German Idealism to a pragmatic religion that had little to do with the Presbyterians of the colonial-era First Great Awakening, or the Methodists of the Second Great Awakening in the early 19th century.

What McDougall calls Bush's "Millenarian" civil religion, by the same token, was not a religion. Its *summa*, the 2005 Second Inaugural, "was not theological at all," Joseph Botum noted in *An Anxious Age* (2014). "Bush delivered the most purely philosophical address in the history of America's inaugurations.... There was not a mention of the Divine in Bush's speech that Thomas Jefferson could not have uttered."

To establish the required continuity between his "classical" civil religion and later Progressivism, McDougall has to strip the founders' religion of its radical character. The founders, McDougall writes, simply were "Anglo-American exponents of Whiggish country-party philosophy who protested capricious rule in the name of their ancient rights as Englishmen." They believed in "reciprocity, neutrality, a separate American system of states, and expansion across the continent." They anticipated few conflicts with other powers. "Madison assured them in *Federalist* No. 45 that interruptions of peace would be rare." As John Quincy Adams wrote, "The purpose of our foreign policy is not to bring enlightenment or happiness to the rest of the world but to ensure the life, liberty, and happiness of the American people."

But the Old World's monarchies and even its republics differ fundamentally from America's republican experiment. The British royal

house styled itself a monarchy by divine right, a successor of sorts to the Davidic kingdom, but it was a latecomer to the concept. From the 7th century onwards, Europe's Christian monarchies promulgated their legitimacy by the Hebrew concept of Election. The social order's sanctity rested in the person of the monarch. By no other imaginable means could Europe have sacralized the national state.

No greater discontinuity, therefore, has appeared in Western political thinking than the 17th-century Puritan claim that monarchy was an object of *idolatry* rather than a vessel of sanctity. Setting things right required instead a sanctified people. As Eric Nelson reported in *The Hebrew Republic* (2010), republicans like John Selden, John Milton, and James Harrington cited rabbinic as well as Biblical texts in opposition to monarchy. Against the concept of Biblical monarchy, the republicans counterposed the Biblical idea of covenant among individuals whose spiritual sovereignty arose from their personal experience of revelation—in the case of the radical Protestants, through Scripture. McDougall quotes Thomas Paine's gloss on I Samuel—God "hath here entered his protest against monarchical government" and named it "the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry"—without mentioning that Paine here paraphrased Milton. McDougall never cites the considerable body of recent scholarship on the English Hebraists.

Even more radical was the founders' decision to eschew a state religion, something no republic of the past had so much as contemplated. The Dutch Republic, the nearest precedent to America's form of government, established Calvinism as a *de facto* state religion. No other nation had entrusted religion to individual citizens rather than to a state church. Americans emerged from the beginning as a covenantal people.

AMERICA'S RELIGION WHEN DE TOCQUEVILLE described it was not the monarchical Anglicanism of country Whigs, but a Calvinist exceptionalism that saw Americans as a brand plucked out of Europe's fire. Through most of the 19th century, Americans had no ambition to export their exceptional system. "In the era of Classical ACR citizens liked to pretend that their enemy number one was monarchy," McDougall observes. "Moreover, the United States maintained correct relations with all the European monarchies, including the Holy Alliance powers."

If Americans were tempted to worship their state, he continues, "Lincoln never abandoned his civil religious faith in America, but he lived



in the knowledge that his was merely ‘an almost chosen people,’ and he died acknowledging the people’s obeisance. America, too, was under judgment.” This point has been made by other writers, for example Mark Noll in *America’s God* (2002), but McDougall states it well.

How then did America leap from Lincoln’s Calvinism to the Progressive conceit that the world was under human control, not under divine judgment? This is McDougall’s weakest moment. The leap from “classic” to “progressive” ACR is the fulcrum of his thesis, but *The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy* has no particular explanation for it. He cites one trend and another, but finding that none quite accounts for the shift, suggests that all of them together “were more than sufficient to unleash American power into the Caribbean, then the Pacific, then the whole world.”

[A]ll those century-old checks against foreign crusades—relative weakness, continental priorities, constitutional constraints, and theological humility—that had previously buttressed self-containment had eroded to the point where devolved Protestant fanaticism burst its chains.... [George] Washington’s World metamorphosed into Wilson’s World.

MORE PERSUASIVE EXPLANATIONS are available. In *The Metaphysical Club* (2001), Louis Menand contends that the New England elite marched to a religious crusade in 1861, and returned as disillusioned pragmatists, convinced that no principle was worth horrors like those of the Civil War. Americans no longer wanted to be judged by the demanding God of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural. After nearly three quarters of a million dead—almost 3% of the country’s population in 1860, or the equivalent of 9 million deaths today—they wanted to control their own destinies and solve their problems on earth.

McDougall ignores Menand, along with most of the other explanations advanced by historians. One source of foreign policy interventionism was the slave interest’s ambitions for an empire including large parts of Latin America. McDougall rejects this out of hand: “No evidence has emerged to revive the old canard that the Mexican War was a slaveholders’ plot,” he writes. What he calls a “canard” was the view of Ulysses S. Grant, who wrote in his memoirs:

The occupation, separation, and annexation [of Texas] were, from the inception of the movement to its final consummation, a conspiracy to ac-

quire territory out of which slave states might be formed for the American Union.... Nations, like individuals, are punished for their transgressions. We got our punishment in the most sanguinary and expensive war of modern times.

By the time President James Polk declared war on Mexico, McDougall counters, Texas had already been admitted to the Union. Moreover, “the southwestern deserts were unlikely terrain for slavery, and some of Polk’s sharpest opponents were Southerners.... Polk’s otherwise measured calibration of U.S. national interest included two provinces he failed to acquire: the densely populated Yucatán peninsula and Spain’s Cuban colony.”

That account doesn’t square with the facts. The South wanted to acquire those territories and more. Robert E. May argued persuasively in *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Em-*

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pire: 1854–1861 (1973) that the slaveholding South hoped to acquire vast territories in Latin America. On the eve of secession Jefferson Davis offered to keep the South in the Union if Lincoln only would annex Cuba. The notion of nation-building outside America’s borders first arose as a justification for the annexation of slave territories.

PRINCETON HISTORIAN MATTHEW Karp expands on May’s argument in *This Vast Southern Empire* (2016). One of the pro-slavery negotiators, Kentucky Senator John Crittenden, proposed in December 1860 to extend the Missouri Compromise line all the way to the Pacific. “Lands ‘hereafter acquired,’ so long as they were south of the 36°30’ boundary, would not be subject to any restrictions; Cuba, Mexico, and all Latin America thus remained theoretically open to slaveholding acquisition.” Karp argues that “proslavery leaders warmly embraced the global dimensions of their struggle.”

Karp’s description of “what might fairly be called a foreign policy of slavery” may be exaggerated, but he and May show convincingly that American slaveholders’ ambitions in the Western Hemisphere required a foreign policy approach radically different from that of the founders, closer in spirit to that of the European imperial powers. Perhaps it is no accident that Woodrow Wilson’s father was a Southern Presbyterian minister who defended slavery: the Civil War’s losers did not like the idea that their humiliation was a divine judgment.

Instead of a world redeemed by God, the Progressives envisioned one made whole by human cleverness. “The Progressive response to all the problems posed by trusts, strikes, immigrants, corruption, education, public health, and more was scientific management through governance informed by credentialed experts,” McDougall observes. “A modern society needed a modern state to fulfill the promise of rapid and permanent progress.”

So did a modern world. Walter Rauschenbusch called the prospect created by the Spanish-American War “momentous” and “epoch-making.” McDougall adds that Rauschenbusch “claimed that God had not raised the United States to great power and wealth merely to be an example to other nations...but rather to act strenuously on behalf of righteousness in the world.”

MCDOUGALL DRAWS A BRIGHT LINE between what he calls “classical ACR” and Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel, but cannot explain why American traded one version of ACR for the other. His effort to work out of this problem produces some of his least convincing argumentation. “Historians of religion have long understood that American Protestantism always displayed a decidedly Hebraic streak,” McDougall contends in the book’s worst moment. “The Social Gospel certainly did insofar as it socialized the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity into an ethic resembling the Jewish *tikkun olam*, the responsibility to repair the world from inside out.” In effect, the Puritans were *Reform Jews*, two centuries before the movement was founded in Frankfurt. Since the Reform Jewish interpretation of *tikkun olam* did not appear in the progressive Jewish world until the 1950s, this is grotesque anachronism.

McDougall’s strange, self-indulgent chapter on World War II consists mainly of a conspiracy theory about Franklin Roosevelt luring both Japan and Germany into a war the American public wanted to avoid. It’s fun to read, but isn’t history. President Eisenhower

is “clumsy” and “indecisive,” and ultimately responsible for getting the United States stuck “to the tar baby called South Vietnam.” Kennedy was worse. He dragged the U.S. into “romantic binges” like Vietnam.

Somewhere in all this McDougall discovers another new version of American Civil Religion, namely “Cold War ACR.” Its goal “was to hold the fort until the triumph of a Millennial ACR, which would double as the first global civil religion.” That would be a John Lennon-esque “world without walls, shorn of ignorance, hatred, and poverty; united in democracy, peace, and human rights; enjoying free movement of people, goods, capital, and ideas. That was the Camelot dreamed of in the sixties.”

AND THEN COMES RONALD REAGAN, who does not fit into *any* of McDougall’s iterations of ACR. Reagan’s “transcendent vision was a mix of optimism, nostalgia, and common sense raised to the level of civil theology.” Ultimately, “seen through the lens of civil religion,” Reagan was not a Burkean conservative but a utopian in the mold of Tom Paine.

That hardly seems adequate. Reagan, after all, restored John Winthrop’s vision of America as a City on a Hill to American consciousness. Even more important, he did so amidst one of the great religious migrations in modern history: the growth of evangelical and other traditionalist denominations at the expense of the Progressive mainline Protestant churches.

McDougall calls the Social Gospel’s emergence a Third Great Awakening, but has nothing to say about America’s religious revival during and after the Reagan years. It does not fit his thesis, so he simply ignores it. Far from deifying the state, the new Christian conservatism sought to limit the state’s

influence over individuals’ lives. One cannot credibly complain about a civil religion that idolatrizes the State while ignoring evangelical Christianity during the last third of the 20th century.

McDougall’s pronouncement on George W. Bush is apocalyptic: “The deformation of American Civil Religion has ended by devouring America itself.” At the end of the day, though, America drew world-improvers, democracy-exporters, and nation-builders to the presidential election of 2016. It then rejected all of them in favor of an outsider who pledged to keep American boots off foreign ground.

The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy fails to sustain its leading idea, the concept of “American civil religion” itself. No people in history is more prone to side with the individual against the collective, to regard the exercise of governmental power with suspicion. In eschewing monarchy and established religion, we instead chose a political model founded on personal piety. We may depart from, and even dishonor, our national sense of the sacred, but something in our national character leads us back to our better nature.

IT’S A SHAME THAT MCDUGALL DID NOT wait a few months before submitting his manuscript. How might he have viewed Donald Trump through “the lens of civil religion”? White evangelical Christians supported Trump by a margin of 81% to 16%, a bigger advantage for the Republican nominee than in any of the four previous presidential elections. It’s easy but wrong to dismiss evangelical support for Trump as evidence of materialism, or even jingoism. More than any candidate since Reagan, though, Trump embodied the Puritan fathers’ antinomian individualism, standing up to authority as popular culture heroes have done from Huckleberry Finn to Jefferson

Smith. That he is a sinner is beside the point. The Calvinist founders of America thought all men depraved and damned but for God’s grace, and regarded the struggle for salvation as an individual pilgrimage to a goal beyond the earthly horizon.

America sanctifies the people, not the state, making our unique form of government possible in the first place. In 2010 the Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod observed that

constitutional restrictions on popular sovereignty imply reliance on an authority that is greater than human. In a republic the people are sovereign, yet the purpose of a constitution is precisely to restrict the power of any future majority. If popular sovereignty is absolute, what right has a constitution to frustrate a future majority by, for example, imposing some form of supermajority?

He concluded, “A purely secular republic would self-destruct because it could not protect its constitution from constant amendment.”

The greater-than-human power that underpins the American state stands outside it, residing in the people, in our religion and culture. It’s not a “civil” religion at all, but one that assigns sanctity to the individual against the state. Disorganized and evanescent, it asserts itself in flashes of enthusiasm and recedes into spiritual torpor for prolonged periods, only to revive when we most need and least expect it. Seen through the lens of America’s religion, last year’s presidential election was a spiritual event of enormous consequence.

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