

Richard Gamble

**RELIGION AND POLITICS IN THE SHINING CITY:
HOW THE “WINTHROP MESSAGE” BECAME
THE “REAGAN MESSAGE”**

Oxford historian Godfrey Hodgson began his 2009 debunking of American exceptionalism with a famous quotation from John Winthrop’s 1630 discourse, *A Model of Christian Charity*. Governor Winthrop, attempting to explain his vision for the Puritan colony of Massachusetts Bay, blended Old Testament passages with Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and John Calvin’s commentary on Matthew 5:14:

Wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when hee shall make us a prayse and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantacions: the lord make it like that of New England: for we must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us.¹

Hodgson ended the quotation here. Winthrop, however, added an important qualification. He warned his fellow colonists not to break what he believed to be God’s covenantal bargain with them in the New World. Immediately after the words “the eies of all people are upon us,” Winthrop continued:

soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world, wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of god and all profes-

¹ G. Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*, New Haven 2009, p. 1. Hodgson cites the 1838 edition of Winthrop’s discourse published by the Massachusetts Historical Society, but the spelling, capitalization, and punctuation differ significantly from that publication.

sours for Gods sake; wee shall shame the faces of many of gods worthy seruants, and cause their prayers to be turned into Cursses upon us till wee be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.²

Anyone familiar with the closing chapters of the Biblical book of Deuteronomy will immediately recognize that Winthrop had Moses on his mind as he addressed his fellow Puritans. The parallel was irresistible. He drew a straight line from Moses' experience to his own, from Moses' concern for the Hebrews about to enter the Promised Land after forty years of wandering to his own concern for God's new chosen people. The blessings and cursings Winthrop listed come right from the last chapters Deuteronomy and include Moses' summary injunction to "choose life."

None of this additional context detracts from Hodgson's point in quoting Winthrop in the first place. The British historian's real target was Ronald Reagan and the Republican president's repeated use of Winthrop to capture a certain brand of American exceptionalism. Hodgson rightly noted the "anachronism" of making the Puritan governor a proto-American and a prophet of the future glory of the United States, and he concluded that "the sermon that Winthrop preached and the sermon that Ronald Reagan used to inspire a conservative shift in American politics some 350 years later have virtually nothing in common."³ Historian John Patrick Diggins raised a similar concern. After careful study, he recognized that Reagan's theology had little in common with seventeenth-century Calvinist views of God's sovereignty, man's depravity, and Christianity's call to a life of repentance and self-denial. Indeed, Reagan's optimism aligned him more closely with Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists' Over Soul than with anything resembling Puritanism.⁴

The distance across the centuries separating Reagan from Winthrop does indeed raise important reminders about the difference between the past as experienced and the past as remembered and reused for purposes previous generations could not have anticipated and in a world they could not have dreamed possible or even desirable. The space that opens up in our mental picture of American history once we put Winthrop back in his own time allows us to know something important about Winthrop, but it also allows us to see and hear things in Reagan's rhetoric we might otherwise miss. While historical distance makes Winthrop less familiar to us, it simultaneously makes Reagan less familiar as well. That unfamiliarity can bring fresh insights. Tracking Reagan's use of Winthrop, especially his now famous Bib-

² J. Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity*, [in:] *Winthrop Papers*, Vol. 2, Boston 1931, p. 295. I have modernized some of the spelling.

³ G. Hodgson, *Myth of American Exceptionalism...*, p. 2–3. Hodgson implicitly criticizes Reagan for calling Winthrop's ship the *Arabella* instead of the *Arbella* (without the extra "a"), but the former spelling was common for centuries and used by other public figures, including John F. Kennedy.

⁴ J. P. Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History*, New York 2007, p. 28, 30, 46, 165 and *passim*.

lical and Puritan metaphor of the “city on a hill,” reveals how the chief executive functioned in the 1980s in his role as the “high priest” of America’s civil religion.⁵ Doing so also shows one instance of how Christianity lost ownership of one of its key metaphors. Ironically, evangelicals’ favorite president did more than any other to take from them a piece of their Christian identity.

Historian John Lukacs has more than once urged those who study the past to bear in mind that what men do to ideas can be more significant than what ideas do to men.⁶ The influence runs both ways, and ideas do indeed have consequences, as the title of Richard Weaver’s classic from the 1940s claimed. But Lukacs’s insight is borne out by Reagan’s handling of America’s identity as the city on a hill. That metaphor, picked up somewhere along the way in the 1960s by the former Democrat turned Goldwater conservative, served Reagan well for twenty years. As early as 1952, Reagan had claimed that America was “less of a place than an idea.”⁷ And that idea became a storyline that brought clarity to his version of American history. In the judgment of one keen observer, Reagan as president became a “narrator, a teller of many stories that all served to expound and defend what he regarded as the one American story.”⁸ The city on a hill seemed readymade to fit into that larger narrative. The picture of America as a chosen, duty-bound, light-bearing city clearly inspired Reagan as did few other ideas. But it is also true that in countless speeches between 1969 and 1989 Reagan remade the metaphor by a process of addition and subtraction. He tacked the adjective “shining” onto the city at some point. But more significantly, he also removed the last traces of the city’s ancient Christian and later English Puritan nuances. Indeed, the phrase “city on hill,” originating in the Gospel of Matthew and understood for hundreds of years as a metaphor of the Church and its teaching ministry, sounds the way it does to twenty-first century Americans, and gets debated within the framework it does, because of Reagan. So successful was he in putting his trademark upon it that his fellow citizens, including most historians and journalists, soon forgot that president-elect John F. Kennedy had introduced Winthrop’s image into American presidential rhetoric back in January 1961 in an address known for a time as the “City on a Hill” speech.⁹ The four

⁵ See: R. V. Pierard, R. D. Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, Grand Rapids 1988, p. 282.

⁶ J. Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness, or The Remembered Past*, New York 1985, p. 126. Lukacs contrasts the novels of Dostoevsky and Flaubert to emphasize this point: “While Dostoevsky describes what ideas do to men, Flaubert describes what men do with ideas: and perhaps the latter may be more significant – certainly for the historian” (126).

⁷ Quoted in: P. Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life*, New York 2004, p. 94. The occasion for Reagan’s comment was a commencement address on June 2, 1952, at William Woods College in Fulton, Missouri, site of Winston Churchill’s famed “iron curtain” speech in 1946.

⁸ H. Hecl, *Ronald Reagan and the American Public Philosophy*, eds. W. Elliot Brownlee, H. D. Graham, *The Reagan Presidency: Pragmatic Conservatism and Its Legacy*, Lawrence 2003, p. 18.

⁹ J. Winthrop, the *Arbella*, and the phrase “city on a hill” appeared in Kennedy’s January 9, 1961, farewell address to a joint session of the Massachusetts legislature. This speech may well have launched Winthrop’s career as a Founding Father and marked his 1630 discourse’s canonization into the American Scripture. See the memoirs of Kennedy’s speechwriter: T. C. Sorensen, *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History*, New York 2008, p. 219. The text of this speech can be found in J. F. Kennedy, “*Let the Word Go Forth*”: *The Speeches*,

simple words “city upon a hill” made their way over the course of the centuries from the Sermon on the Mount to Puritan New England to modern Americanism. And most of the credit and blame for the most recent reconfiguration belongs to Reagan. More than any other modern figure, Reagan transformed Jesus’ metaphor into a secular political slogan inseparable from the 1980s “Reagan Revolution” and from that movement’s legacy in the Republican Party. Republican candidates use it endlessly now to attach themselves to Reagan’s image in the conservative mind. Its political use has been powerful enough to all but eclipse its Biblical meaning, even among many American Christians who might reasonably be expected to resent seeing their metaphor dressed up like Uncle Sam.

In his autobiography, published the year after he left the Oval Office, Reagan made one passing reference to John Winthrop. Recalling the last year of his first term as president in 1984, he wrote of his conviction at the time that America “had begun the process of spiritual revival that was so badly needed.” By a “spiritual revival” Reagan did not seem to have in mind anything to do with the repentance, conversion, or awakening as understood by Christian theology. Instead, he wrote of recapturing a “special vision” – Winthrop’s reminder to his fellow colonists “that they had the opportunity to create a new civilization based on freedom unlike any other before it, a unique and special ‘shining city on a hill.’”¹⁰ Reagan’s emphasis on freedom and a new civilization had less in common with Winthrop’s original purpose for his colony than with Thomas Paine’s revolutionary rhetoric. Paine was Reagan’s favorite among the Founders, and he quoted the patriot’s belief that America in 1776 had the capacity to “begin the world over again” about as often as he quoted Winthrop. Nevertheless, this sole reference to Winthrop in the former president’s memoirs little indicates the city on a hill’s hold on Reagan’s imagination.

His first known use of it came in October 1969 during the first of his two terms as governor of California. At some point in his career as a public speaker, Reagan began jotting down on note cards quotable phrases from historical figures ranging from Emma Lazarus to Lenin.¹¹ On one of these cards, Reagan may well have written his much-used quotation from Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity.” The discourse had been widely available in anthologies since the 1930s, and the actor-turned-politician could easily have encountered it in any number of places. Kennedy had already quoted from it in 1961 and Lyndon Johnson had invoked the same passages in a speech in Boston in 1964. The occasion for Reagan’s 1969 speech, and Winthrop’s likely debut in his political rhetoric, was a fund-raising event in Washington, D.C., for the fledgling Eisenhower College, a liberal arts institution in Seneca Falls, New York, founded four years earlier. With Vietnam War

Statements, and Writings of John F. Kennedy, 1947–1963, selected with an introduction by T. C. Sorensen, New York 1988, p. 56–58.

¹⁰ R. Reagan, *An American Life*, New York 1990, p. 299.

¹¹ R. Reagan, *Reagan, In His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan that Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America*, edited with an introduction and commentary by K. K. Skinner, A. Anderson, M. Anderson, with a foreword by G. P. Schultz, New York 2001, p. 13–14.

protestors very much on his mind (he faced them at UC Berkeley as California's governor), Reagan appealed in his speech for a renewal of individual character to save American civilization. Since this event marks Reagan's first known use of Winthrop to convey his vision of America, it is worth quoting once again. Reagan varied the text only slightly from published versions available in 1969, adding the definite article "the" in front of "people" and "all" in front of "the world":

We shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all the people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through all the world.¹²

In light of how Reagan would handle this quotation over the next two decades, a few things stand out in hindsight that could not have made any impression on his audience at the time. Reagan had not yet added the word "shining" to his city and the quotation included the warning of divine judgment that would mostly disappear later as Reagan pared down these lines. We can catch a glimpse of how Reagan would rework Winthrop's message in the future by reading on to the next sentence of the California governor's appeal to potential donors: "To you who are considering what you can do to support Eisenhower College, I tell you that without such schools, this shining dream of John Winthrop's may well become the taste of ashes in our mouths."¹³ Despite the mixed metaphor, the audience could not have missed his point. And though the college did not survive beyond the early 1980s, Winthrop's city had begun its path to national stardom.

Just over four years later, near the end of his second term as governor of California, Reagan addressed the first Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington, D.C. This annual event became a boot camp for young conservatives eager to be at the movement's epicenter. Reagan's 1974 speech, the first of a dozen he gave at CPAC between 1974 and 1988, included details about the setting for Winthrop's words that became stock elements in his narrative, among them the image of the "tiny deck" of the *Arbella* and the common assumption that Winthrop delivered his sermon while aboard that ship and near America's shores. Not one of these points can be corroborated by surviving evidence. The historical record is surprisingly thin. Nevertheless, the story of the courageous band of intrepid voyagers possessed a mythic quality that for Reagan transcended the literal events of 1630. These are the kinds of things repeated about the Puritans over the centuries in countless patriotic orations and that have become a durable part of the story of America's founding. If they sound to cynics like the stuff of fable, it is important to remember that many popular college textbooks continue to repeat these same "facts."¹⁴

¹² R. Reagan, *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches*, New York 1989, p. 44.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ All twelve of these speeches have been published in R. Reagan, *A City Upon a Hill: Speeches by Ronald Reagan Before the Conservative Political Action Conference, 1974–1988*, ed. J. C. Roberts, Washing-

Here in Washington in 1974, again in his 1975 CPAC appearance, and in most of his subsequent uses of Winthrop, Reagan positioned the shining city near the end of his speech as a sort of summary call to covenantal obedience. Significantly, for the time being he retained Moses' and Winthrop's stern warning about the judgment that will fall upon the covenantal people who betray their God. In fact, in his 1975 CPAC speech he dropped the "city on a hill" entirely for the moment and kept only the admonition not to "deal falsely with our God" lest we become "a story and a byword throughout the world." Despite these sober words, Reagan never judged America guilty of this sin, not in the 1970s in the immediate wake of Watergate and Nixon's resignation and not at any time in the future. "We have *not* dealt falsely with our God," he reassured the assembled conservative activists in 1974, adding humorously, "even if He *is* temporarily suspended from the classroom" – a reference to the Supreme Court's rulings a decade earlier against government-sponsored prayer and Bible-reading in the nation's public schools. America remained faithful as the chosen nation. It had kept its side of the covenantal bargain and could therefore be assured of God's blessing. It had been a nation destined for "world leadership" from nearly the beginning. And in the disillusionment of the mid-1970s, Reagan believed, "Americans are hungry to feel once again a sense of mission and greatness."¹⁵

In 1976, the increasingly popular Reagan ran for the Republican nomination against President Gerald Ford. He failed to unseat the incumbent, but over the next four years he solidified and widened his base of supporters. Increasing frustration among voters with the economy and foreign policy under Jimmy Carter handed Reagan the perfect opportunity. Leading up to the 1976 and 1980 races, Reagan refined his message week by week in his nationally syndicated radio spots. Called "Viewpoint," the program aired from January 1975 to October 1979 with a break for several months while he campaigned in 1975 and 1976. Reagan wrote these short talks himself in longhand. They provide historians with instances of Reagan's thoughts and words unaltered by speechwriters and handlers. In one address, taped on August 7, 1978, his account of the "ideological struggle" then underway between communist totalitarianism and American freedom led him naturally, and seemingly inevitably by this point in his political career, to the Puritan settlers who for him defined America's mission. His handwritten script reads: "John Winthrop on the deck of the tiny Arbella in 1630 off the coast of Mass. said to the little band of pilgrims; 'We shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken & so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story & a byword throughout the world.'" "This work," understood three centuries earlier by Winthrop as the task

ton 1989. Winthrop and/or the "city upon a hill" appear in at least the first four of these speeches (January 25, 1974; March 1, 1975; February 6, 1977; and March 17, 1978). In the 1978 speech, he added the word "shining" to the city.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 10, 20.

of security liberty for Christians to worship God according to the dictates of Scripture and conscience, became in Reagan's hands an expression of modern political, economic, and religious freedom and a tool of American anticommunism. "The oath of the Communist Party U.S.A. written in 1930," he added tellingly, "says nothing of a city upon a hill."¹⁶

Reagan as presidential candidate, in the run-up to the 1976 and 1980 races, refined his vision of America's national destiny. By the late 1970s he had stocked his rhetorical arsenal with quotations and metaphors he assembled and reassembled in almost any order to capture America's providential calling and, more generally, to articulate America's civil religion. To Winthrop's city and Tom Paine's itch to "begin the world over again," the Republican candidate added Franklin Roosevelt's "rendezvous with destiny" and Pope Pius XII's belief that "into the hands of America God has placed the destiny of an afflicted mankind."¹⁷ But Winthrop and his city remained the most consistent and predictable image in Reagan's narrative. When he announced his candidacy on November 13, 1979, he talked of Americans' faith in the future and indirectly criticized President Jimmy Carter's hand-wringing back in July about the nation's "crisis of confidence." Reagan rejected fatalism and any suggestion of limits to prosperity, resources, and national greatness. He blamed the overgrown, centralized federal government itself for the economic crisis of the 1970s. In this context, Reagan drew Winthrop's city into his battle to replace malaise with optimism. Tom Paine contributed his revolutionary rhetoric again and, sandwiched between two citations of FDR's "rendezvous with destiny," Winthrop appeared once more "on the deck of the tiny Arbella" to tell his "little band of pilgrims" the now-familiar story of who they were. According to Reagan, the world watched in 1979 to see if America would reach its destiny and "become that shining city on a hill."¹⁸

In an undated letter from some time after his November 13 announcement, Reagan took the time to explain to a correspondent who had quibbled with his capitalization of "Pilgrim" why he called the Massachusetts Bay colonists "pilgrims" at all. They were, of course, Puritans who remained within the Church of England and not the Separatists who settled Plymouth Colony and were later known to history as the Pilgrims. It had been common in the nineteenth century for historians and Yankee politicians to use Puritan and Pilgrim almost interchangeably, but this distinction was not on Reagan's mind. He had his own purposes. "I had simply used pilgrims with a small 'p,'" he wrote, "meaning any such group of people who are embarked on a journey such as those who first came to this country. I just hadn't

¹⁶ R. Reagan, *Reagan, In His Own Hand...*, p. xiv-xv, 13-14.

¹⁷ For examples of each of these quotations, see: R. Reagan, *A Time for Choosing: The Speeches of Ronald Reagan, 1961-1982*, ed. A. Balitzer, Chicago 1983, p. 179, 201, 232, and 233.

¹⁸ R. Reagan, "Official Announcement of Candidacy for President," November 13, 1979, www.reagan2020.us/speeches/candidacy_announcement.asp (accessed June 9, 2009). This online version capitalizes "Pilgrim," but Reagan did not, as his letter to John McClaughry makes clear. See: R. Reagan, *Reagan: A Life in Letters...*, p. 289-290.

given thought to the fact that it might be translated to the particular group that were called Pilgrims among our Founding Fathers.” He thanked his correspondent, and promised that he would “simply refer to them as a little band of travelers or whatever from now on.”¹⁹ Without pushing this evidence too far, or pretending that a single letter can reveal much about a man’s thinking, it would seem to be the case that for Reagan Winthrop and the Puritans mattered for what they symbolized in his picture of America and not for their exact identity in recorded history. Even his wish to have them be “a little band of travelers” simplifies the more complicated reality about these colonists. Far from having been a scrappy handful who braved the icy waters of the North Atlantic, the first contingent of Puritans alone numbered 400 and filled four ships, with another 600 hundred settlers close behind.²⁰

Reagan the campaigner never missed an opportunity to talk about the city on a hill. In his televised national debate with independent candidate John Anderson during the 1980 race, the Republican hopeful ended his closing remarks by fusing Tom Paine and John Winthrop once again. “I believe,” he concluded,

the people of this country can, and together, we can begin the world over again. We can meet our destiny – and that destiny [is] to build a land here that will be, for all mankind, a shining city on a hill. I think we ought to get at it.²¹

Reagan, of course, went on to defeat both Anderson and Carter in November, and he carried Winthrop with him into the White House. More than twenty of his presidential speeches over the next eight years, from foreign policy addresses in 1981 to his last weekly radio address broadcast in 1989, mention the city on a hill in some way. The shining city became a fundamental part of his message of spiritual renewal, national pride, expanding opportunity, global democratic revolution, and America’s providential calling. Compressing two terms in the Oval Office and two dozen speeches into a few paragraphs of analysis can distort the pattern of Reagan’s thought and words into an amusing caricature. The president’s repeated use of Winthrop’s words with little variation in content or emphasis, when viewed in a matter of minutes rather than stretched over the course of nearly a decade, can make Reagan seem scripted and predictable beyond what the fuller context warrants. Any public speaker, author, or teacher, having his rhetoric subjected to the same telescoped analysis, would come off looking one-dimensional and unimaginative. Nevertheless, the patterns do appear in his speeches, perhaps to a degree Reagan himself was not aware of, making it possible to generalize about how and why President Reagan used Winthrop’s metaphor.

First, the shining city meant economic freedom and progress. Reagan made this point clear in a long luncheon speech to the World Affairs Council of Philadel-

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ E. S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop*, Boston 1958, p. 55.

²¹ The website of the Commission on Presidential Debates has a complete transcript of this debate. See: www.debates.org/pages/trans80a_p.html (accessed June 10, 2009).

phia in October 1981. He was about to travel to Mexico for a summit on economic development among poorer nations. Over the shouts of protestors in the back, Reagan used Winthrop to define America as a land of freedom where individual initiative, hard work, and perseverance find their certain reward. Free markets – stabilized by voluntary cooperation and the institutions of home, church, and school and helped by a government that breaks down barriers – energize the economy and benefit everyone. A year later, speaking to the National League of Cities, the president tied Winthrop to domestic economic renewal and envisioned multiple vibrant cities dotting the land: “America must once again be filled of leaders [like Winthrop] dedicated to building shining cities on hills, until our nation’s future is bright again with their collective glow.”²²

Second, Reagan envisioned the shining city as the point from which America’s creed emanated to the world. On October 3, 1983, Reagan addressed a banquet in Washington, D.C., celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank that had done so much to promote the Reagan Revolution through its policy initiatives. He spoke of the nation’s economic recovery and his buildup of national defense, but then zeroed in on the “democratic revolution underway” around the globe. In dealing with the Soviet Union, he disavowed a negative policy of containment and called instead on the “free world” to “go on the offensive with a forward strategy for freedom.” America’s mission was clear:

we must present to the world not just an America that’s militarily strong, but an America that is morally powerful, an America that has a creed, a cause, a vision of a future time when all peoples have the right to self-government and personal freedom.

This vision, he argued, resonated with America’s oldest founding principles, a connection that led him once again to, yes, John Winthrop. To the familiar story of tiny boats and huddled bands, Reagan added what had once been commonplace in his citations of Winthrop but had since become rare and was about to vanish entirely: the warning of divine judgment against those who deal falsely with God. But, true to his upbeat message, the president declared America not guilty. “America has not been a story or a byword. That small community of Pilgrims prospered and, driven by the dreams and, yes, by the ideas of the Founding Fathers, went on to become a beacon to all the oppressed and poor of the world.” Reagan asked his audience members to pledge that they would labor hard so that future generations would say that they “did keep faith with our God.”²³

As paradoxical as it may seem, Reagan believed that global democratic revolution defined conservatism in the late twentieth century. That revolution would bring prosperity, freedom, peace, and security to the world. And this raises a third

²² R. Reagan, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1981: January 20 to December 31, 1981*, Washington 1982, p. 938. Hereafter cited as *Public Papers* followed by year, book, and page number.

²³ *Public Papers*, 1983, Book 2, p. 1406–1408.

meaning for the shining city embedded in the other two: America's divine calling summoned it to a universal and perpetual task. Winthrop's warning to the Puritans to live obediently to the covenant before the eyes of a watching world in order not to bring shame on the cause of the Gospel was refracted through Reagan's prism into an expansive mission to all the world. Man was born to be free. America had the divine mandate to make that freedom a reality. In a July 4th speech in Decatur, Alabama, in 1984, Reagan compressed two of Winthrop's sentences into a global mission statement: "We shall be as a shining city for all the world upon the hill."²⁴ In 1986, after his summit in Iceland with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, he called the American dream "the oldest dream of humanity: the dream of peace and freedom, a dream that someday must belong to every man, woman, and child on Earth."²⁵

These examples could be multiplied many times over. But one speech in particular, given near the end of his presidency, reinforced and summarized all of the meanings Reagan had worked out for the shining city during his presidency, and did so nearly in the exact chronological order in which he had developed them. The event was the opening rally for the August 1988 Republican national convention in New Orleans. Reagan's challenge at the convention was to persuade his supporters that his vice president, George H. W. Bush, was the safe and genuine successor to the Reagan Revolution. Near the end of his speech on August 14, Reagan urged the party to remind voters of the party's "vision." In the few sentences that followed, Reagan gave perhaps his clearest explication of the city on a hill to date. He provided almost an outline of how he had defined the city in previous presidential speeches. The Republicans, he said, ought to spread their message of "a future of economic growth and opportunity and democratic revolution and peace among nations." He then emphasized America's "destiny" and "great calling" and appealed to the "shining city," "a city aglow with the light of human freedom, a light that someday will cast its glow on every dark corner of the world and on every age and generation to come."²⁶ Here, then, were the three themes embodied in the city: economic growth and opportunity; democratic revolution and world peace; and America's global and eternal mission.

These meanings did not go uncontested in the 1980s. Liberal critics in the media and political opponents in the Democratic Party attacked Reagan's appropriation of Winthrop. Writing in *The Nation* immediately after the Republican triumph in November 1980, Richard Lingerman moodily pondered why Reagan had won. The ignorant American voters had disappointed this columnist by how easily they had fallen for the "aw-shucks" and "folksy" Reagan. A fear-mongering huckster, he had played to their self-pity, promised to "make America feel good about itself again," and parlayed that seductive message into victory. "Reagan is the man from

²⁴ *Public Papers*, 1984, Book 2, p. 1001.

²⁵ *Public Papers*, 1986, Book 2, p. 1515.

²⁶ *Public Papers*, 1988–1989, Book 2, p. 1078.

the land of the happy ending,” the journalist complained, dismissing Reagan’s version of the American dream as superficial. What did that dream amount to? Only that “America will be the shining ‘city upon a hill,’ Reagan’s crib from a sermon by John Winthrop in 1630 on board the ship *Arbella* bound for the New World.” Paraphrasing from F. Scott Fitzgerald, Lingerman concluded that in voting for Reagan “America has found its past again.” But that nostalgic version of the past would prove inadequate, he predicted, and “the sadness will come.”²⁷

Democratic leaders also mobilized against Reagan’s message and city in a way that would be too risky in the twenty-first century. During the 1984 campaign, New York Governor Mario Cuomo served as the point man to launch a bristling attack on Reagan’s shining city. He had to take on a popular president and rally support for the Democratic candidate, former Vice President Walter Mondale. Invited to give the keynote address at the Democratic national convention in San Francisco in July, the governor called his friend Larry King, popular host of the long-running cable television talk show, *Larry King Live*, and asked his advice. King later recalled Cuomo reading the entire speech to him over the phone and then asking him what he thought of the strategy of going after the Winthrop metaphor. “You like this ‘city on the hill’ idea?” Cuomo asked, adding that he intended to attack the image and not the president. The convention expected him to be tough on their opponent, he said, “But I always call him President Reagan in this speech. I never slam him personally.” King traveled to San Francisco and heard Cuomo deliver his speech in person. He remembered that as he stood there he “knew that magic was happening that night.” “Anybody standing in that audience knew it,” he continued. “They knew that a new figure had emerged on the American scene. The speech was delivered like a summation to the jury by a great trial lawyer...”²⁸

Cuomo’s “trial lawyer” prosecution of Reagan thrilled the convention audience that night. *New York Times* columnist William Safire called the speech “a stunner.” Cuomo’s opening salvo challenged the president’s stewardship of the city. In his thick New York accent, he acknowledged that “in many ways we are a shining city on a hill.” “But the hard truth,” he added,

is that not everyone is sharing in this city’s splendor and glory. A shining city is perhaps all the President sees from the portico of the White House and the veranda of his ranch, where everyone seems to be doing well.

“But there’s another city; there’s another part to the shining city,” he continued, listing off the economic hardships still faced by many Americans in the prosperous 1980s. In fact, he said, the American story was better described as a “Tale of Two Cities” than as a “Shining City on a Hill.” He accused Reagan of subscribing

²⁷ R. Lingerman, *Reagan Wins: The Hollow Man*, “The Nation” 1980, November 15, www.thenation.com/doc/19801115/lingeman (accessed May 11, 2009).

²⁸ L. King, *Tell It to the King*, New York 1988, p. 99. See also: W. Safire, *Rack Up That City On a Hill*, “New York Times” 1988, April 24.

to a social Darwinist philosophy of “survival of the fittest” that kept the city shining for the few and the powerful. Cuomo’s partisan strategy may have been predictable, but his astute use of Reagan’s favorite image for America points to just how potent it was or was becoming. Tellingly, Cuomo worked hard not to discredit the metaphor or to return it to the hands of his own Catholic Church, but rather to reassure the electorate that the Democratic Party and its policies and not the Republicans and their policies would build “one city, invisible, shining for all its people.”²⁹

None of this criticism in 1980 or 1984 deterred Reagan from using the metaphor year after year until he left office. Indeed, the single use cited most often by historians, journalists, and bloggers was one of his last. His farewell address to the nation on January 11, 1989 offered his longest and most detailed justification for why he had invoked the shining city so often during his career. In this nationally televised address from the Oval Office, Reagan saved his discussion of Winthrop till the end, as had been his custom for decades. He claimed bluntly that John Winthrop had used the metaphor of the city “to describe the America he imagined.” Winthrop was a “freedom man,” Reagan said. Then, in simple but poignant words, Reagan offered a parting vision of his city:

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 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.³⁰

Though Reagan called his city “God-blessed,” it seems fair to say that it was utterly secular, no more than a bustling, tolerant, commercial enterprise. This picture, of course, bears little resemblance to what John Winthrop likely imagined for the future of his plantation in New England. His venture had been in part a commercial enterprise, but only in part. For good or ill, the Puritans’ religious mission had vanished in Reagan’s narrative. On the literal surface, the words of the metaphor had survived, but the underlying meaning had been lost. The metaphor had become an empty vessel into which Reagan poured his own content. The metaphor may have been enriched in some ways, but it was impoverished in others. It lost whatever Biblical and Puritan meaning it had had. Reagan’s last weekly radio address, broadcast a few days after his televised farewell, reinforces just how far away from Jesus and Winthrop he had carried the city. With any theological or historical content absent, *any* content became possible. The Puritan settlers, he claimed, had hoped to “found a new world, a city upon a hill, a light to the nations.”

²⁹ M. Cuomo, “Democratic National Convention Keynote Address” 1984, July 16. A fairly accurate transcription of Cuomo’s speech is available at www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mariocuomo1984dnc.htm. See also: W. SaFire, *Ringling Rhetoric* “New York Times” 1984, August 19.

³⁰ *Public Papers*, 1988–1989, Book 2, p. 1722.

And the metaphor obligated America to act. “Those words and that destiny beckon to us still. Whether we seek it or not, whether we like it or not, we Americans are keepers of the miracles.”³¹

Reagan and his wife Nancy retired to their ranch in California in 1989. Republican and Democratic presidents, candidates, and pundits continued to talk about America as the city on a hill, but more often than not in reference to Reagan himself. Democrats spoke respectfully of the metaphor, not daring now to criticize a catchphrase so closely identified with the memory of a former president who soon seemed to belong to the American people as a whole and not to any particular party or agenda. Republicans and Democrats continued to fight over the creedal content of the city, but no one doubted that America was called to be the city on a hill. Thanks largely to Reagan, the metaphor had become as inseparable from the American identity as the Stars and Stripes and the Battle Hymn of the Republic. As Reagan faded into the darkness of Alzheimer’s, his metaphor became a holy relic of the American civil religion.

No event so far in the twenty-first century has made Reagan’s identification with Winthrop’s city clearer than his funeral service at Washington’s National Cathedral in the summer of 2004. Reagan died on June 5 of that year at the age of 93. President George W. Bush, visiting Paris when he received the news, spoke just after midnight the following day. In a simultaneously odd and fitting remark, he said that Reagan’s “work is done, and now a shining city awaits him.” The city had become heaven itself. Years before, Reagan and Nancy had worked out every detail of his ecumenical funeral service. Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim clerics participated. Included among the three hundred pages of carefully detailed plans was a role for Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, a Reagan appointee to the high court and the first woman so honored. Rabbi Harold Kushner, 1980s bestselling author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, read from the prophet Isaiah, and then O’Connor came to the front. Unsurprisingly, the Reagans had asked her to read a few excerpts from none other than John Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity” – namely, his quotation from the Old Testament prophet Micah (“What does the Lord require of you but to do justly, love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”) and his reference to the city on a hill, including the warning of divine judgment.³²

Former Republican Senator John Danforth, an ordained Episcopal priest, officiated at Reagan’s funeral. Between renditions of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” sung by the Armed Forces Choir and “Amazing Grace” sung by Irish tenor Ronan Tynan, he delivered his brief homily. His words of comfort invoked neo-orthodox theologian Reinhold Niebuhr’s “children of light” and numbered Reagan among the light-bearers. Oddly, he never once mentioned Christ. Nevertheless,

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 1736.

³² A. C. McFeatters, *Sandra Day O’Connor: Justice in the Balance*, Albuquerque 2005, p. 193. This study of Justice O’Connor does not provide footnotes.

Senator Danforth noted that the choice of texts (Matthew 5: 14–16) for his sermon was “obvious.” After all, Reagan often quoted Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount, albeit indirectly by way of Winthrop’s discourse: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid.” In Reagan’s reading of history, Danforth perceived, Winthrop’s city stood for America itself. And the former Senator accepted Reagan’s projection of the modern American nation retrospectively back into Winthrop’s discourse. “Winthrop believed that the eyes of the world would be on America because God had given us a special commission, so it was our duty to shine forth.” Simply put, “The Winthrop message became the Reagan message.”

Only gradually between 1969 and 1989 had the “Winthrop message” become the “Reagan message.” That message – putting aside the question of whether its twentieth-century progressive optimism and materialism had any vestige of Winthrop left in it – could easily have become the “Kennedy message” or perhaps even an emblem of the Great Society. But neither Kennedy, nor Johnson, nor Nixon, all of whom quoted from Winthrop’s discourse, attempted to affix the metaphor of the city on a hill onto America with Reagan’s tenacity and success. Reagan was not the first to use it. He was certainly not the last. But he made it his own.

Analyzing the Reagan message is not easy. For one thing, his story was not always ideologically consistent or coherent. It was libertarian and New Deal; conservative and revolutionary; globalist and nationalist; populist and elitist. It waged the Cold War and at the same time crusaded for nuclear disarmament. It invoked John Winthrop, Tom Paine, and Ralph Waldo Emerson – sometimes in the same paragraph. Reagan, consciously or not, tried to synthesize every element of the American identity. In part because of this eclecticism, the former president became as mysterious and controversial as any chief executive in American history.

In interpreting the American identity to his generation, or at least in doing so to his political constituency, Reagan effectively deployed the “city on a hill.” He found it useful in any number of settings, domestic and foreign. The metaphor seemed to speak to the heart of his civil religion. The phrase “civil religion” can be thrown around casually by historians and political theorists, but used precisely it serves as an adequate label for two distinct but interrelated patterns in any modern nation’s self-understanding, and these patterns both appeared in Reagan. On the one hand, it means a doctrinally vague theism of the sort found on U.S. currency and in the Pledge of Allegiance. The Supreme Court once referred to this national affirmation of faith as “ceremonial deism.” This god of our civic ceremonies remains largely anonymous. He is not the God of the Apostles Creed or of the Trinitarian formulation of the Nicene Creed. Anyone but an atheist can picture his own god during a presidential inauguration or a July 4th celebration. On the other hand, “civil religion” can also mean a set of aspirations that define a nation as distinct among its peers, beliefs about who we are that we raise to the level of doctrine within a national creed, including those documents that embody our beliefs and that we raise to the level of national scripture. In the case of the United States, these

might include, and not without controversy, belief in democracy, religious tolerance, free-market economics, and the separation of church and state, and a canonical set of documents that might include, again not without controversy, the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Gettysburg Address. These are the ideals and texts Americans subscribe to in order to identify themselves and to unite themselves into one people. For those who understand America primarily as a nation dedicated to a proposition, as Lincoln described the United States in the midst of the Civil War, getting these dogmas of the national faith right – and getting right with these dogmas – becomes critically important.

Every president in American history has participated in some degree in the nation's civil religion. It is a question of degree. And here is where Reagan stands out, and this is the context in which his favorite quotation from Winthrop makes the most sense. Though he quoted the Bible less often than other presidents – a surprising tendency given his vision of God's providential relationship with the United States – Reagan endowed America's civil religion with more doctrinal content than any other chief executive. Moreover, he served as the most successful high priest of that national liturgy.

A few scholars have done the foundational work necessary to begin to understand Reagan's civic theology. In 1988 Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder compared various presidents' handling of civil religion.³³ They began their study of Reagan, who was just ending his second term at the time, by looking at a passage from his eulogy for the American sailors killed aboard the USS *Stark* in the Persian Gulf in 1987. In what can properly be called a civil religion sermon, the president reassured grief-stricken families and the nation that these men had achieved immortality by sacrificing themselves for "something immortal." He offered more than comfort to those who mourned, however. He promised that God had welcomed them into heaven because of their service to the nation. His meaning was unmistakable:

In giving themselves for others, they made themselves special, not just to us but to their God... We know they live again, not just in our hearts but in His arms. And we know they've gone before to prepare a way for us.³⁴

These statements led Pierard and Linder to conclude that at this moment Reagan served "as the high priest of American civil religion" and did so "more unabashedly, forcefully, compellingly, and with greater national acceptance than any previous president." Indeed, he refined the American civil religion to such a degree, they charge, that he brought it into "direct competition with genuine religion."³⁵

³³ R. V. Pierard, R. D. Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency...*

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 257.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 258.

If true, this possibility alone is enough to weigh Reagan's interpretation of the American identity and mission carefully.

Working from a large body of Reagan's claims about America from his childhood through his presidency, Pierard and Linder were able to discern at least four distinct yet interrelated beliefs that comprised his civil religion. First, he believed in American exceptionalism, especially the nation's identity as God's chosen people for a special task. Second, he saw America and Americans as inherently good and spiritual, typically speaking of American renewal in terms of a religious awakening. Third, Reagan affirmed that national wellbeing required what these authors called "religion-in-general," an indistinct, ecumenical "faith" that would promote public virtue. And fourth, the president believed that this religious vitality, wedded to military strength, would defeat evil in the world, most notably communist totalitarianism.³⁶ Using the "city upon a hill" as a shorthand to sum up Reagan's civil religion, the authors concluded that while, along with millions of Americans, "the president possessed a personal faith that was genuine and meaningful to him, both he and they subsumed it under the higher public faith." In the 1980s, "civil religion reached a new pinnacle in the American experience as it was exalted by a powerful, priestly president."³⁷

More recently, Hugh Heclo described Reagan's view of America as something a bit different from, or larger than, exceptionalism. That view, Heclo argued, can best be called "a sacramental vision." St. Augustine succinctly defined a sacrament as an outward sign of an inward work of grace. Reagan's metahistory found an inner reality to the American story. For Reagan, "the sacramental quality consisted in understanding the American experience to be set apart as something sacred, a material phenomenon expressing a spiritual reality." This sacramental reading of America affirmed the nation's "divine election"; its calling not just to work out its own salvation but to labor on behalf of the world as the "redeemer nation"; and its role in breaking the cycle of decline and inaugurating a new epoch in human history. Heclo rightly pointed out that Americans had gotten into the habit of saying these kinds of things about their nation long before Reagan. It was only in the more secular late twentieth century that this way of talking started to sound so odd to academics and journalists. Nevertheless, by the end of his largely sympathetic reading of Reagan, Heclo added the caution "that Reagan was unable to recognize that his faith and redemptive vision of America sailed dangerously close to idolatry, if not quite landing there." In particular, he faulted Reagan for neglecting Winthrop's more balanced view of what it meant to be a city on a hill, that such visibility meant only that God and man would judge the city, watching to see if it succeeded or failed. Reagan's "doctrine," Heclo continued, saw "American goodness with only the barest sense of judgment looming in the background."³⁸

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 274–280.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 283.

³⁸ H. Heclo, *Ronald Reagan and the American Public Philosophy*..., p. 21–22, 35.

As astute as these critiques of Reagan's civil theology are, they fail to consider one widely neglected but important question: whether Reagan, or any American leader for that matter, should have called the United States the "city on a hill" in the first place. Americans need not choose from among an antireligious secularism that is deaf and blind to theology, a low-voltage, populist civil religion, or even a more traditional sense of national election that keeps a place for divine judgment. They can instead reserve divine election and the "city on a hill" for the Church and the Church alone. Christians in the United States can think of themselves from an Augustinian perspective as first and foremost citizens of the City of God, living in tension with the world, and sojourning as pilgrims for a time within a recent manifestation of the City of Man called America. Keeping their eternal citizenship in mind, they can object when either Democrats or Republicans co-opt any part of the Church's identity for their own use, no matter how good their intentions, as Ronald Reagan's certainly appeared to be.

Ronald Reagan took hold of a metaphor and reworked it to such a degree that a nation of 300 million people has lost the ability to hear that metaphor in any way other than how he heard it. When Americans read Winthrop's discourse, their eyes skim over page after page until they find the familiar "city upon a hill." When historians and political theorists quote from it and anthologize it, they take care to include the famous passage that readers expect to be there, whether earlier generations thought those were the discourse's defining sections or not. Unless Americans expend great effort, they hear Reagan's voice, not Winthrop's, and certainly not Jesus' when they encounter the city on a hill. The transmutation of Jesus' message into Winthrop's message and then into Reagan's message highlights the complex interplay between the sacred and the secular in modern America, the easy blending of the things of Caesar and the things of God, regardless of how high Americans think the largely imaginary "wall of separation" stands between politics and religion.

In a review of Godfrey Hodgson's *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* published in the "New York Times" in April 2009, columnist Roger Cohen noted that from the beginning America has had the "city upon a hill" embedded in its "psyche." Just how far back that identity goes is open to historical scrutiny, but he raised a valid point obvious to anyone who spends much time thinking about the American past. "At the heart of American exceptionalism," he wrote, "lies a messianic streak, the belief in a country with a global calling to uplift." After summarizing Hodgson's complaint that Reagan began a trend toward national "hubris and self-interest" that "corrupted" a once-noble vision, an otherwise sympathetic Cohen faulted Hodgson for suggesting that a more self-aware "sobered United States can and should become simply a nation among nations." The United States' own history makes such an ordinary status impossible. "America was born as an idea," he protested, adding a non sequitur: "and so it has to carry that idea forward." Apparently believing that the world needs ideological nations, Cohen worried that the United States "is in many ways the last ideological country on earth." "An American re-

vival,” he continued, “without its universalist embodiment of liberty, democracy, the rule of law and free enterprise seems to me impossible...”³⁹

One cannot help but notice how close Cohen, a man of the political Left, came to sounding like Reagan, the crusader for the Right. The words are interchangeable. To be sure, the same words in the mouths of different men can carry very different connotations and meanings. But that reality ought not obscure what the similarity in language might reveal about modern American politics and religion. A debate over American exceptionalism might in fact be a debate between varieties of exceptionalism. It might look and sound like an argument from opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, while in truth being a left-wing exceptionalist arguing with a right-wing exceptionalist. The real, or more meaningful, debate over how to interpret American history and identity might therefore be the one between exceptionalists of all sorts on one side and skeptics on the other, that is, between those who believe that the United States is somehow exempt from human finitude, original sin, the lust for dominion, and the limits of resources and power and those who do not. And because exceptionalism has tangled up within it the problem of civil religion, it may well be that the deepest fault line today is not the obvious one between religious and irreligious people, between believers and secularists, but the largely invisible one between religious orthodoxy and Americanism. In the 1860s, Fyodor Dostoevsky, through the voice of his Underground Man, predicted that in the age of ideology we would sooner or later figure out how to be born only from an idea and not from real fathers. This is the danger propositional nations face. We think that an “idea” helps us see our national identity more clearly when in fact the very simplicity that makes the American Idea so appealing blinds us to the complexity of our past and prevents genuine self-understanding. As president, Ronald Reagan guaranteed, at least for now, that the American nation and the city on a hill would be fused into one indistinguishable symbol in the public consciousness. As long as that confusion persists, it will narrow debate over the American identity to what might be false options, or at least to a needlessly truncated range of options. As long as that confusion persists, it will also render Christians oblivious to the boundaries between the two cities they inhabit.

³⁹ R. Cohen, *America Unmasked*, “New York Times” 2009, April 26, www.nytimes.com/2009/books/review/Cohen-t.html (accessed May 20, 2009).