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## Messianic Nation: A Christian Theological Critique of American Exceptionalism

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ARTICLE

MESSIANIC NATION:  
A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE  
OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

WILLIAM T. CAVANAUGH\*

September 11, 2001 has taken on the status of a *kairos* moment in U.S. history, a decisive hour when, we are told, everything changed. In the New Testament, *kairos* often takes on eschatological significance, a time of crisis, as distinguished from the ordinary calendar time of *chronos*.<sup>1</sup> A kind of eschatological sensibility pervades discourse about September 11, not necessarily in the sense of an end to chronological time, but rather a suspension of ordinary time. We live in a state of exception, a time when exceptional measures such as torture become thinkable. *Kairos*, however, does not legitimize a generalized state of anarchy in which rules are suspended for everyone. *Kairos* is Messianic time,<sup>2</sup> a time for one decisive actor to appear on history's stage. In the language of American exceptionalism, that actor is the United States, the "indispensable nation," as Madeleine Albright called it,<sup>3</sup> the one exceptional nation needed for exceptional times.

Although I have been using theological language to describe American exceptionalism, such discourse need not be explicitly theological. I want to distinguish between two broad types of American exceptionalism, one with Judeo-Christian roots, and the other with its roots in the Enlightenment. There is of course much mixing of the two types, but they represent two quite distinct ways of approaching the question of exceptionalism. The first explicitly appeals to Christian theological concepts such as the election of Israel and God's providence. The second appeals to Enlightenment concepts concerning the universal applicability of the American value of freedom. The two types of American exceptionalism would appear to be at odds: the one appeals to a nation under the Christian God, the other to the

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1. Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History* 39–55 (Floyd V. Filson trans., Westminster Press 1950).

2. See e.g. *Acts* 3:20.

3. Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* x (Harvard U. Press, 2002).

freedom to have one God, none, or many. I am going to argue, however, that both of them—theologically speaking—end up in the same place, and it is not a good place from the point of view of Christian theology. My basic argument is that when a direct, unmediated relationship is posited between America and a transcendent reality—either God or freedom—there is a danger that the state will be divinized.

The first two sections of this article will offer a brief overview of the two types of American exceptionalism. I will then evaluate one contemporary attempt—from Stephen H. Webb—to combine the two from a theological point of view. In the final section, I will argue that American exceptionalism in both forms is a fundamental distortion of Christian doctrines of election and providence.

### I. AMERICA AS THE NEW ISRAEL

In its original form, American exceptionalism is an explicitly theological notion, based in the doctrine of election. Just as God chose the Israelites to accomplish God's special purposes on earth, so God has chosen the United States. The promise to make Abraham a "great nation" includes the promise of a new land.<sup>4</sup> The doctrine of election is based in the notion of God's choice of a particular people at a particular moment in history, but it also contains a strong element of universalism. Abraham is promised blessings not only for his own people; his people would in turn become a blessing for the whole earth.<sup>5</sup> There is a strongly universalizing missionary impulse at the heart of the doctrine of election. Salvation is not just *for* the Jews, but *through* the Jews, for the sake of the whole world.

Christian interpreters from the New Testament onward saw the church as the fulfillment of Israel. The idea that the doctrine of election could be applied to nations in the modern sense would have to await the creation of nations.<sup>6</sup> In the sixteenth century we find William Tyndale expounding on the idea that England, like Israel of old, stood in a special covenant relationship with God, a relationship that implied not just blessings but responsibilities, and severe punishment for shirking those responsibilities. Tyndale's commentaries accompanying his English translation of the Bible identified covenant as the central theme of the biblical narrative.<sup>7</sup> Tyndale's translation had a tremendous impact on the Puritans who would colonize the New

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4. *Genesis* 12:1–2.

5. *Id.* at 12:3.

6. Adrian Hastings argues that the idea of Israel as a nation influenced nascent English nationalism as early as the high Middle Ages, but I tend to agree with critics who argue that what Hastings means by "nation" bears very little resemblance to the modern use of the term. Modern nationalism is only possible once the state makes sovereignty attainable. For Hastings' view, see his *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism* (Cambridge U. Press 1997).

7. See Tyndale's *New Testament* (William Tyndale trans., David Daniell ed., Yale U. Press 1989).

World. The other major influence was John Calvin, whose emphasis on election many Puritan leaders imbibed firsthand while in exile in Geneva. The Puritans also absorbed Calvin's ecclesiology, in which civil authority was an arm of the church.<sup>8</sup>

When the Puritans were harried out of England and migrated to the New World, they regarded their journey as an opportunity to reconsider the theme of covenant. Settling in a new land suggested a parallel with the Israelites leaving bondage in Egypt and claiming the Promised Land.<sup>9</sup> In John Winthrop's writings, the theme of the covenant pervaded.<sup>10</sup> Still, however, the theme of judgment was prominent; status as God's chosen people meant not just blessing but responsibility.<sup>11</sup> In Winthrop's famous exhortation aboard the *Arbella* in 1630, he used the prophet Amos to connect chosenness with judgment: "So He tells the people of Israel, you only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore will I punish you for your transgressions."<sup>12</sup> Winthrop's famous evocation of the fledgling colony as a "city upon a hill" (from Matthew 5:14) was followed by dire warnings of God's wrath should the colony "deal falsely with our God."<sup>13</sup> The elevated position of the city only exposed it to the greater scrutiny of God and the world. For this reason it was all the more important that civil and ecclesiastical governance be inseparable. In Winthrop's view, "the care of the public must overshadow all private respects, by which, not only conscience, but mere civil policy, doth bind us."<sup>14</sup>

As long as church and state were closely intertwined, the identification of the colony with a new Israel was less difficult to justify from biblical precedent. The church mediated between God and the civil authority. With the shift from Puritan theocracy to the disestablishment of the church in the First Amendment, however, the theme of the new Israel became an important theme in nascent American nationalism. The relationship between God and America was increasingly direct. The church came to mediate not between God and America, but between the individual and God and between the individual and America. The new Israel was identified not with any church or churches in their manifold diversity, but with America as such. Despite the significant differences between the Puritan narrative and Revolutionary ideals, the new nation found in the Puritan genealogy the only readily available myth for the genesis and destiny of America.<sup>15</sup> The pri-

8. Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* 25–26 (U. of Ill. Press 2003).

9. *Id.*

10. See John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity*, <http://religious-freedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html> (accessed Mar. 9, 2006).

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.* at ¶ 57; see Amos 3:2.

13. Winthrop, *supra* n. 10, at ¶ 61.

14. *Id.* at ¶ 43.

15. Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* 15–21 (Hill & Wang 1995).

mary difference is that the location of chosenness moved beyond the confines of ecclesial structures and embraced the new nation as a whole. America, as the new Israel, became itself a kind of metachurch. Thus George Washington was hailed as a new Moses.<sup>16</sup> Even such a foe of organized religion as Thomas Paine could not resist the use of the Puritan genealogy to speak of America's chosen destiny.<sup>17</sup>

The theme of America as the new Israel took on increasing importance in the nineteenth century, with a tone and substance increasingly different from that of the Puritan narrative. Consider Herman Melville's contention that "we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time."<sup>18</sup> Melville links the biblical theme of election to the nineteenth century theme of progress: "The Past is the text-book of tyrants; the Future the Bible of the free."<sup>19</sup> Americans "are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours."<sup>20</sup> The world will be blessed through this new Israel, but not through fear of the Lord.

Long enough have we been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in *us*, if we would but give utterance to his promptings. And let us always remember that with ourselves, almost for the first time in the history of earth, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy; for we cannot do a good to America, but we give alms to the world.<sup>21</sup>

Here we see a shift from a nation under God to a nation as God's incarnation on earth, the nation as Messiah. Once the relationship between God and America becomes direct and unmediated, the identification of America's will with God's becomes a readily present temptation. In Melville's quote, we see the blending of the biblical notion of election with American ideas of progress, expansion, and capitalism. Winthrop shades into Adam Smith, where the naked pursuit of self-interest works—by the invisible hand of divine providence, through the mechanism of the free market—for the benefit of all. As American expansionism accelerated in the late nineteenth century, it became increasingly common to wed biblical notions of providence to the progress of the world toward American-style democracy and free market capitalism.<sup>22</sup>

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16. Stephen H. Webb, *American Providence: A Nation with a Mission* 34 (Continuum 2004).

17. Stephanson, *supra* n. 15, at 13.

18. Herman Melville, *White Jacket: or the World in a Man-of-War* 151 (Nw. U. Press & Newberry Lib. 1970).

19. *Id.* at 150.

20. *Id.* at 151.

21. *Id.*

22. See Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* 153–65 (U. of Chi. Press 1968); see also Russel B. Nye, *This Almost Chosen People: Essays in the History of American Ideas* 1–42 (Mich. St. U. Press 1966); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Talcott Parsons trans., Charles Scribner's Sons 1958) (Max Weber's

## II. THE EMPTY SHRINE

Melville's comments provide an apt transition point to another strand of American exceptionalism that owes more to Enlightenment thought than to biblical precedents. This type of exceptionalism is based not in the particularism of the election of Israel by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but in the putative universalism of certain concepts of freedom and right. In the Enlightenment narrative, the tragedy of religious violence can only be solved by a recognition of the indeterminability of the truth about God, at least on a public level. It is this recognition that has given priority to the freedom to worship the god of one's choice, or no god at all. The primacy of freedom to the good becomes not just a political theme but an economic one as well. This priority of freedom is embodied in democracy and free markets, which hold the key to the happiness of all. The nation that is the vehicle of this hope for the world is exceptional, therefore, not because it was chosen by a particular act of the biblical God, but because it is based in something prior and more universal: the freedom of the human will. The United States is not the successor to a past Chosen People, but is, as Colin Powell has said, the first "universal nation,"<sup>23</sup> the first to break the bonds of particularity.

This type of American exceptionalism is not necessarily antitheological, but refrains from using theological language out of respect for the human conscience. According to Michael Novak, words like "God," when used in an official capacity by the government, are "like pointers, which each person must define for himself. Their function is to protect the liberty of conscience of all, by using a symbol which transcends the power of the state and any other earthly power."<sup>24</sup> A Christian will fill in the content of symbol with Christian doctrine; an atheist will fill in with no content at all. What matters is that at the public heart of democratic capitalism there is an "empty shrine," swept clean out of reverence for the transcendent. According to Novak, the emptiness of the shrine is precisely what makes democratic capitalism universal, the key to the wealth and happiness of the nations.<sup>25</sup>

Novak's "empty shrine" is the theological corollary of the idea of "openness." Democracy and free markets are open insofar as they do not try to impose any preconceived goods, but allow the individual to embrace his or her own goods. Freedom is not a substantive good but a formal structure that maximizes the possibility of each person to realize his or her particular goods. What America has discovered, therefore, is not particular to

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famous thesis about Protestantism and capitalism would draw a direct line from Puritan Calvinism to American capitalism. I think this thesis is suggestive, but it is not necessary for the purposes of my present argument.).

23. Bacevich, *supra* n. 3, at 219.

24. Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* 54 (Simon & Schuster 1982).

25. *See id.* at 50–55.

America, but is the key to happiness and peace for the whole world. Nevertheless, as the first realization of this universal truth, America is exceptional and has the obligation to spread its blessings throughout the world, by peaceful means if possible, but by military means if necessary.

As Andrew Bacevich has shown, although “openness” has become a buzzword under the last three U.S. administrations, the concept goes back at least to the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Openness has meant first and foremost the breaking down of all global barriers to free trade. As banker Charles Conant said in 1898, “the United States shall assert their right to free markets in all the old countries which are being opened to the surplus resources of the capitalistic countries and thereby given the benefits of modern civilization.”<sup>27</sup> The unique role of the United States in expanding the scope of freedom is highlighted here, but also highlighted are the benefits that openness with other countries would bring to the entire world. The kind of zeal that Christian missionaries were bringing to distant shores in the nineteenth century was matched by the zeal to bring freedom to the more dimly lit regions of world, where darkness and savagery were said to reign. Today the flow of Christian missionaries from the United States to other parts of the world has largely abated, but missionary zeal for openness has not. As President Bush’s National Security Strategy says, the United States will use its unique military and economic position not to press for unilateral advantage, but to “extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent.”<sup>28</sup>

Besides a kind of secularized missionary zeal, the Enlightenment strand of American exceptionalism also has a kind of secularized version of providence, which tends to go by the name of “history.” From Francis Fukuyama’s famous thesis about the “end of history,”<sup>29</sup> to Bill Clinton’s, Condoleezza Rice’s, and George W. Bush’s separate contentions that America has found itself on the “right side of history,”<sup>30</sup> a common narrative about the end of the Cold War is being told. The collapse of the Soviet Union has rendered history’s unmistakable verdict in favor of democracy and free markets. No viable alternative remains. And America is not simply one exemplar of such freedom. America is the vanguard of freedom, the force that contained communism and led the way for the rest of the world to follow. America is the destiny of the rest of the world. America thus stands in an ambiguous position regarding history. On the one hand, history is larger than America. On the other hand, America is the driving force behind history. As Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said, “We have our own

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26. Bacevich, *supra* n. 3, at 55.

27. *Id.*

28. George W. Bush, *Prologue*, in *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Sept. 17, 2002) (available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nssall.html>).

29. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History?* 16 *National Interest* 3, 3–18 (Summer 1989).

30. Bacevich, *supra* n. 3, at 33, 34, 216.

duty to be authors of history.”<sup>31</sup> Given the emphasis on human freedom, America is not simply subject to history but is charged with making history come out right.

Although the Enlightenment version of American exceptionalism eschews explicitly theological language, it is not devoid of theological consequences. If God language has been banished in an attempt at modesty, to respect the free human conscience, the exceptionalist rhetoric and the god-like ambitions of America in history have not been tamed. Indeed, because we are the *most modest*, we stand out as the exception to history. Because we are the *most open*, we have an obligation to share that openness with the rest of the world, and to use our power to overcome any barriers to openness. Nowhere is this paradox more apparent than in the realm of American military power. By some accounts, the United States spends more on its military than all the other nations of the world combined.<sup>32</sup> The goal is what the Pentagon’s *Joint Vision 2010* calls “Full Spectrum Dominance.”<sup>33</sup> According to former Defense Secretary William Cohen, “Technology now gives the United States an opportunity that no other military has ever had: the ability to see through the fog of war.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, omniscience and omnipotence are now within our grasp. This aspiration is expressed in Pentagon codenames “Infinite Reach” and “Infinite Justice” for two recent military operations.<sup>35</sup> As General Tommy Franks has said, the new technology gives U.S. military commanders “the kind of Olympian perspective that Homer had given his gods.”<sup>36</sup> The aspiration of America, in its position as exception to the nations, is to rise above history, to see and act as God sees and acts. We know what is good for everyone, and we have the power to enforce that vision anywhere in the world.

It would be easy to dismiss Franks’ comments as a bit of hyperbole, or as merely metaphorical. No one really believes that the American nation-state or the military is a god. I think we would do well, however, to remember jurist Carl Schmitt’s famous dictum about the modern state:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their sys-

31. *Id.* at 33.

32. Guy Anderson, *US Defence Budget will Equal ROW Combined “Within 12 Months,”* [http://www.janes.com/defence/news/jdi/jdi050504\\_1\\_n.shtml](http://www.janes.com/defence/news/jdi/jdi050504_1_n.shtml) (May 4, 2005).

33. Bacevich, *supra* n. 3, at 133.

34. *Id.*

35. The name of Operation Infinite Justice was subsequently changed to Operation Enduring Freedom. See *Global Security.Org*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/infinite-justice.htm>. (accessed Apr. 10, 2006).

36. Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* 22 (Oxford U. Press 2005).

tematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts.<sup>37</sup>

If we are to understand why the secularized Enlightenment version of American exceptionalism has not cured the idea of its missionary zeal and ambitions to direct history, we should attend to Schmitt, for whom state sovereignty is simply the taking over of the omnipotence and omniscience of God by the political authority. Secularization in Schmitt's sense is not the stripping away of the sacred from some profane remainder. Rather, the state takes over the theological underpinnings of the church, and casts them in terms that are only implicitly theological. Every political structure, according to Schmitt, is undergirded by a "metaphysical image" of the world.<sup>38</sup>

The deepest theological danger inherent in American exceptionalism, then, is that of the messiah nation that does not simply seek to follow God's will, but acts as a kind of substitute God on the stage of history. When the concept of chosenness becomes unmediated by the church and unmoored from the biblical narrative, the danger is that the nation will not only be substitute church but substitute God. When the shrine is emptied of the biblical God and replaced with a generic principle of transcendence, there exists the danger that we will not come to worship God, but will worship our freedom to worship God. The empty shrine is surreptitiously filled. Our freedom itself becomes an idol, the one thing we will kill and die for. This would not surprise Emile Durkheim, for whom all religion is the collectivity's worship of itself. According to Durkheim, religion is the social group's way of representing itself to itself. All religion, in other words, is civil religion.<sup>39</sup> From a Christian theological point of view, this is true only of false religion. True religion is not self-worship but worship of the one true God. How one discerns the difference between true worship and idolatry, however, is a matter that requires all the resources of a constitutive tradition and a church that is capable of making such judgments.

### III. EVANGELICAL ENLIGHTENMENT

If the unmooring of American exceptionalism from its biblical origins has proven to be theologically hazardous, is the answer to reconnect them? According to Stephen H. Webb, the answer to that question is yes. Webb has published the most significant recent theological defense of the idea of American exceptionalism in a book called *American Providence*. According to Webb, if Christians do not learn to read history theologically, then we capitulate to the privatization of the biblical God. The secularized version

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37. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* 36 (George Schwab trans., MIT Press 1985).

38. *Id.* at 46.

39. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* 465 (Joseph Ward Swain trans., The Free Press 1965).

of the Enlightenment has sapped our ability to read history providentially because the modern myth of freedom tells us that we, not God, are in charge of history. The doctrine of providence has taken on a bad odor because it seems to set God up in competition with human freedom.<sup>40</sup> For the biblical authors, on the other hand, God remains active in human history without thereby diminishing human freedom. We must recover the ability to read history as the Bible does, as the unfolding of God's purposes in history in the acts of humankind.<sup>41</sup>

According to Webb, this biblical reading of history demands a type of American exceptionalism. We must discern God's activity not in general but in specific events and specific places. And any reading of recent history must take account of the preponderant role that America has played on the world stage. "While Israel is the key to history, another nation has undeniably moved to the front pages of current affairs and will stay there for the foreseeable future."<sup>42</sup> Webb acknowledges that one should not baptize every American action,<sup>43</sup> nor should one think that America is the only nation through which God is working.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, "that America is doing more than any other nation to spread the kinds of political structures that can best prepare the globe for God's ultimate work of establishing the final kingdom is not theologically insignificant."<sup>45</sup>

The kind of political structures to which Webb refers in this quote are those found in American-style democracy, along with their economic counterpart, the free market. Webb believes that the Christian evangelization of the world will be completed once the world is opened up to American-style freedoms. Webb thus blends biblical language with Enlightenment themes. He rejects the anticlerical French version of the Enlightenment, but embraces the Anglo-Saxon, Lockean version, which he claims was deeply theological.<sup>46</sup> Webb believes that the ultimate success of the Enlightenment project of human freedom is part of God's plan to open up the world to the choice of Jesus Christ. Webb therefore approves of what he calls George W. Bush's "Evangelical Enlightenment or enlightened Evangelicalism" (he also calls it "evangelical Kantianism").<sup>47</sup>

Speaking to an audience of Iraqi immigrants in Dearborn, Michigan, President Bush stated an Enlightenment ideal that was worthy of Immanuel Kant: "The desire for freedom is not the property of one culture. It is the universal hope of human beings in every culture." The [P]resident can speak with such confidence

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40. Webb, *supra* n. 16, at 21–22.

41. *Id.* at 1–9.

42. *Id.* at 7–8.

43. *Id.* at 8.

44. *Id.* at 6.

45. *Id.* at 8.

46. *Id.* at 78.

47. *Id.*

because he combines the Enlightenment heritage of optimistic humanism with the evangelical fervor of an altar call.<sup>48</sup>

It is not clear here if evangelicalism provides any content, or just “fervor.” Webb believes that democracy and free markets are ultimately a product of Christianity, specifically “the great Protestant theme of freedom.”<sup>49</sup> But that freedom is essentially an empty shrine; “there is no wizard behind all the glittering machinery of the new empire.”<sup>50</sup> This is good news, however, because it keeps us from repeating the mistakes of past empires. We have no “coherent social vision” to impose on others. “Our very respect for freedom, in other words, both fuels our overseas endeavors and inhibits us from developing the kind of ideology that could result in global domination.”<sup>51</sup> America is not a particular social vision but the universal form of freedom. According to Webb, “Everyone can be American while still maintaining something of their own national identity.”<sup>52</sup> This does not mean that Webb embraces openness and freedom for its own sake. The ultimate purpose of spreading openness is to allow for the spread of the Christian gospel. “Forcing Muslim nations into democratic political orders can accomplish much good in the world, but it needs to be recognized that this goal is theological as well as political.”<sup>53</sup> By this, Webb does not mean that Muslims should be forcibly converted to Christianity. He means that they should be converted to American-style democracy—forcibly if necessary—so that Muslims may have the opportunity to freely choose Christianity. America is not the gospel, but is the vehicle that God has chosen to spread the gospel. American-style democracy provides the empty form for evangelization, but the Christian gospel provides the content.

Webb is certainly right that the doctrine of providence requires Christians to discern God’s activity in history. The question is, With what criteria and with what authority are Christians to make such judgments? The danger in locating God’s activity in America is that America itself becomes the criterion for locating God’s activity in the world. The danger, in other words, is that the form/content relationship becomes inverted. The biblical narrative provides the form—God acts directly in history—without providing the content of that activity. The real content becomes the ideology of American-style democracy and free markets. The criterion for discerning God’s activity in history is provided by America, and not by the actual content of the Gospel.

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48. *Id.*

49. Stephen H. Webb, *On the True Globalism and the False, or Why Christians Should Not Worry So Much about American Imperialism*, in *Anxious about Empire: Theological Essays on the New Global Realities* 119, 121 (Wes Avram ed., Brazos Press 2004); see also Webb, *supra* n. 16, at 10.

50. *Id.* at 112.

51. *Id.* at 85.

52. *Id.* at 111.

53. *Id.* at 139.

For Webb, the main criterion for reading current events providentially seems to be what is taking place on a grand scale on the stage of history. Although Webb acknowledges that success is not the only criterion of God's favor,<sup>54</sup> the unique rise of America is repeatedly held up as evidence that God is working through America in a special way. After the triumph of Western liberalism over communism, Webb says, "we have come to a point where history affords a pretty clear text."<sup>55</sup> God has pretty clearly pronounced in favor of American-style democracy and free markets. Criteria derived from Jesus' activities in the Gospel are largely irrelevant. For example, Webb explicitly rejects the idea of reading history from the underside, that is, from the point of view of the poor majority of the world's population. "God moves nations by working through history, not against it. By definition, the poor are not effective agents of significant historical change."<sup>56</sup> Gandhi had the backing of wealthy friends, Martin Luther King's movement depended on the middle class. "The poor *are* agents of God's grace (as opposed to being agents of significant historical change) precisely because they are occasions for the nonpoor to open themselves to aiding others."<sup>57</sup> Jesus' preference for the poor and the outcast have nothing to do with reading history. They end up as good moral lessons about individual charity—"charity works best on an individual level," Webb says<sup>58</sup>—but charity cannot be the key to the way God is acting in history, because it accomplishes nothing on a grand scale. Likewise, Jesus' nonviolence and death on a cross are peripheral to a providential reading of history. Martyrdom can be an individual decision. "Nation-states, however, cannot be founded on the principle of this willingness to die rather than to fight."<sup>59</sup>

As a result of this unwillingness to read providence from the point of view of the cross, Webb does not leave much room for God's judgment to interfere with America's sense of mission. Although he acknowledges that providence is a dialectic of judgment and blessing,<sup>60</sup> he tends to dismiss attempts to apply judgment to specific cases of American conduct as "typical bromides of the left."<sup>61</sup> Those who protested the Vietnam War were motivated by "an orgiastic embrace of excessive forms of behavior fueled by utopian political theory."<sup>62</sup> The "leftist critique of globalism is a case of sour grapes."<sup>63</sup> Contemporary European anti-Americanism is "a psycho-

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54. *Id.* at 52.

55. *Id.*

56. *Id.* at 62.

57. *Id.*

58. *Id.* at 64.

59. *Id.* at 159.

60. *Id.* at 25.

61. *Id.* at 73.

62. *Id.* at 26.

63. *Id.* at 110.

logical disturbance along the lines of an obsession.”<sup>64</sup> Webb makes no serious attempt to deal with slavery, the genocide of the Indians, or any other inconvenient facts about American power. The problem is not simply that Webb reads American history and sees the glass as half full. The problem is that Webb’s providential reading of history leans heavily toward the account told by the victors. If God works through “significant historical change,” and the greatest agent of significant historical change on the contemporary scene is America, then America becomes itself the criterion for discerning God’s action in the world. America strides godlike across the world stage, moving history forward. As Americans, it becomes our responsibility to make history come out right.

Reading history for signs of God’s providential activity is an exercise that Christians must undertake as independently as possible from ideologies of both the right and the left. To do so as Christians requires an account of the church as that body that has the authority, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to discern God’s activity in history, and is itself, as the Body of Christ, a significant locus of God’s activity in history. The New Testament writers understood the church as the eschatological gathering of Israel, the historical body that mediates God’s truth to the world. Unfortunately, Webb’s account largely bypasses the church. Webb writes,

How God acts in history cannot be unrelated to the ways in which humans organize themselves to achieve their own ends. This approach suggests that God works in history not only through individuals but also through nation-states, if for no other reason than we are all political creatures, enacting our identities in families, communities, and nations.<sup>65</sup>

Webb jumps from individuals to nation-states without considering the church as a locus of God’s work in history. It is not that Webb has no church, but that the church simply cannot be a significant political presence in its own right. For example, Webb applauds René Girard’s analysis of Jesus Christ as the divinely innocent victim who shows the way to a future without scapegoating and violence. The church must not simply try to embody this activity of God in history, however.

If the church should try to embody this peace, it would become one institution among many, with its own enemies, and thus the church would become just another state. The church, in other words, even as it preaches peace, is in need of the balance of powers between nation-states in order to protect it and provide the space for its mission. Only God can bring scapegoating to an end; until then, states are necessary to keep enemies in check.<sup>66</sup>

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64. *Id.*

65. *Id.* at 7.

66. *Id.* at 161.

The violence of the nation-state can be seen as a locus of God's activity in history; the church, however, cannot try to embody the peace of Jesus Christ in history. God will make the peace of Jesus Christ actual, but only in some vague and distant future. In this view, America, not the church, is where we must look for God's activity in the here and now.

It is extremely significant, I think, that Webb ends his book on American providence with a chapter on (of all people) Carl Schmitt. Schmitt had tried to rescue democracy in the Weimar Republic by strengthening the hand of the government to act. His position led him within a few short years to become something of the official jurist of Hitler's government, until falling out of favor with the Nazi party in 1936.<sup>67</sup> Schmitt's brief flirtation with Nazism has not erased his influence, which in the United States has largely been channeled through Leo Strauss. Schmitt defined sovereignty as that power that decides on the exception. The mere proceduralism of liberal democracy was incapable of dealing with threats to state order. The sovereign cannot be subject to the law at all times, but must be given the power to rise above the law and decide in exceptional circumstances.<sup>68</sup> Schmitt is useful because, according to Webb, the doctrine of providence requires the ability to discern and act decisively in concrete historical circumstances. For Schmitt, "the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology."<sup>69</sup> According to Webb, liberal proceduralism does not allow the intrusion of God into the political system, but absorbs the miraculous into itself.<sup>70</sup> Schmitt helps us to see both the necessity of the decisive political actor within American politics—Webb cites George W. Bush in the wake of the 9/11 attacks<sup>71</sup>—and the necessity of America itself to act as global sovereign. "[W]ithout some kind of world religion, global management will have to work through the imposition of power rather than the quest for consensus."<sup>72</sup> America must take its place as the decisive actor that channels the actions of God in the new world order.

"The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy."<sup>73</sup> Webb finds this basic distinction of Carl Schmitt's useful because it helps to mark out a legitimate autonomy for the political realm. Only the state can decide who is friend and who is enemy, and only the state can decide whom to fight. This dynamic is what gives meaning to national politics. Unfortunately, says Webb, the church has tried to interject itself into this process; Webb

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67. Michael Hollerich, *Carl Schmitt*, in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* 107, 108–09 (Peter Scott & William T. Cavanaugh eds., Blackwell Publg. 2004).

68. Schmitt, *supra* n. 37, at 5–15.

69. *Id.* at 36.

70. Webb, *supra* n. 16, at 162.

71. *Id.* at 167.

72. *Id.* at 114.

73. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* 26 (George Schwab trans., Rutgers U. Press 1976).

echoes Schmitt's insistence that the state and not the church determine what is or is not a just war.<sup>74</sup> According to Webb, "The problem is not that the church embraces peace but that the church wants to displace the political sphere with its legitimate determination of who is to count as the enemy."<sup>75</sup> The church "wants to usurp the personal authority of the sovereign for the formal rule of law," which, in Webb's terms, is to ban God from direct intervention in history. The church preaches forgiveness, and this may have political application at times, but to dismiss the friend-enemy distinction is to abandon the doctrine of providence. "God's enemies are not necessarily our own, of course, but to be a friend of God is to seek out God's purposes in history, and those purposes are not unrelated to the struggle for freedom, a struggle that involves the tragic necessity of war."<sup>76</sup>

Part of what Schmitt was trying to do was to retain the sense that political authority comes from God, and not from the people who act as God. The problem with democracy, according to Schmitt, was that God is made immanent; in a democracy the people absorbs the transcendent into itself. Schmitt cites with approval Tocqueville's observation that "in democratic thought the people hover above the entire political life of the state, just as God does above the world, as the cause and the end of all things. . . ."<sup>77</sup> Webb applauds Schmitt's diagnosis, but chides Schmitt for subsuming the theological into the political, in effect identifying God with the state. According to Webb, the "outermost sphere" that makes possible all social relations is the Kingdom of God, not the state. The Kingdom of God, however, is not a political but an eschatological reality, "a theological discourse on violence that can, *no matter how far into the future*, trump the political."<sup>78</sup> Webb also claims that Schmitt is right about democracy in general, but America is a "stunning exception" to the rule. Americans are democrats who do not reject a transcendent authority, but have translated it into the doctrine of God's providential guiding of America.<sup>79</sup> Unlike Europeans, "Americans were never forced into thinking that they had to make a decision for either the state or the church."<sup>80</sup>

In theory, then, Webb has managed to combine the two strands of American exceptionalism—the biblical and the Enlightenment—while avoiding the danger of reducing the Christian faith to mere civil religion, the self-worship of the collective. America's mission of spreading liberalism remains "under God." The violence of the state remains ultimately, "no matter how far into the future," subordinate to the Kingdom of God. It

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74. Hollerich, *supra* n. 67, at 118.

75. Webb, *supra* n. 16, at 156.

76. *Id.*

77. Schmitt, *supra* n. 37, at 49.

78. Webb, *supra* n. 16, at 162 (emphasis added).

79. *Id.* at 163–64.

80. *Id.* at 163.

may be, however, that Schmitt was more clear-eyed about the nature of the modern nation-state. For Schmitt, it is not enough to solve the question of the relation of the spiritual and the political orders in the abstract. The real question is, who decides? Schmitt cites Thomas Hobbes's discussion of the "demand that state power be subordinate to spiritual power because the latter is of a higher order."<sup>81</sup> Hobbes, says Schmitt, "rejected all attempts to substitute an abstractly valid order for a concrete sovereignty of the state."<sup>82</sup> For Hobbes, power attaches to persons, not to abstract orders such as a "spiritual power," or, we may add, the "Kingdom of God." The real question is, who must obey whom? For Schmitt, as for Hobbes, there can be no doubt: the state has the whole power to decide in matters of politics and matters of war. Schmitt utterly rejects Bellarmine's idea that the church possesses an "indirect power" in temporal matters.<sup>83</sup> For Schmitt, the decision for either the state or the church at the political level is unavoidable, and America is not an exception. To act decisively in a way that realizes transcendent—and not merely immanent—authority, the modern state must be unitary. Providential action requires the overcoming of what Schmitt called the "typically Judeo-Christian splitting of the original political unity."<sup>84</sup> As Michael Hollerich comments, Schmitt's words about Hobbes apply equally to himself: Hobbes's absorption of the church into the state has the intention of "'rendering harmless the effect of Christ in the social and political sphere; of de-anarchizing Christianity, while leaving it in the background a certain legitimating function.'<sup>85</sup>

In order for these words not to apply to Webb's American exceptionalism as well, he will have to ensure that the church provides something more than a legitimating function for civil religion. The danger in this type of exceptionalism is that of idolatry; the state, which represents both the will of God and the will of the people, will come to identify the two. Webb believes that America has avoided this danger. America is the exception, since belief in the biblical God is still strong here. The problem, in my view, is that the political presence of the biblical God is mediated through the official discourse of America, and not through a distinctively Christian body that stands under the explicit authority of Jesus Christ. The church as mediator between God and America—a church that has the critical distance

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81. Schmitt, *supra* n. 37, at 33.

82. *Id.*

83. The sixteenth century thinker St. Robert Bellarmine claimed that the Pope's power in temporal matters could only be exercised when spiritual matters were at stake, e.g. the propagation of the faith or the salvation of souls. Robert Bellarmine, *Controversarium 3a: De Summo Pontifice*, in *Extracts on Politics and Government from the Supreme Pontiff from Third General Controversy* 105 (George Albert Moore trans., Country Dollar Press 1951). Henri de Lubac discusses and critiques Bellarmine's distinction in his article, *The Authority of the Church in Temporal Matters*, in *Theological Fragments* 199–233 (Rebecca Howell Balinski trans., Ignatius Press 1989).

84. Hollerich, *supra* n. 67, at 118.

85. *Id.* at 119.

to pronounce judgment as well as blessing—is in danger of being erased. What has happened in effect is that America has become the new church. When the relationship of America and God is thus direct, there is little to check the identification of God's will with America's. America is God's people, the bearer of God's salvation to the world. The "typically Judeo-Christian splitting of the original political unity" into what St. Augustine called the "Two Cities," the *civitas terrena* and the *civitas dei*, has been absorbed into the omnipotent modern nation-state. Without the irritant of the Body of Christ, the body politic is free once again to divinize the political authority, to transfer the sovereignty of God to the sovereign state.

#### IV. ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

What does the "typically Judeo-Christian splitting"<sup>86</sup> of the political order entail? It means first that Israel's election calls a body that does not fit neatly into any existing political order, because obedience to God trumps all other kinds of obedience. God has elected Israel, and not any nation-state, to be the primary agent of God's activity in history. The election of Israel is the primary datum of the biblical theology of providence. Furthermore, Israel is not a nation-state in any modern sense. Israel's experience of what might be called statehood was relatively brief, between David and the conquests by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Israel's prior experience as a tribal confederation, and subsequent experience as a temple community and as a federation of synagogues, show that the nation-state is not by any means the most determinative analogue for Israel.<sup>87</sup> Israel is a people, one that stands in a unique relation to all the nations of the earth, because of its covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In the Christian theological tradition, the fulfillment of Israel is not any nation-state, but the church. The New Testament church understood itself as the eschatological fulfillment of the gathering of Israel, consummated in the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>88</sup> The letter of James addresses Christians as the "twelve tribes in the dispersion."<sup>89</sup> Following the ascension of Jesus, the early church found it necessary to choose a replacement for Judas, so that the sign value of the twelve disciples, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, would be maintained.<sup>90</sup> The New Testament word translated "church" is *ekklesia*, a term used in Greek city-states meaning "a public assembly, the popular assembly of the political community."<sup>91</sup>

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86. *Id.* at 118.

87. Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church? Toward a Theology of the People of God* 106–20 (Linda M. Maloney trans., Liturgical Press 1999).

88. *Id.* at 121–34, 184–201.

89. *James* 1:1.

90. *Acts* 1:15–26.

91. Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith* 77 (John P. Galvin trans., Fortress Press 1984).

In the Septuagint, the scripture of the New Testament authors, *ekklesia* had been used to translate the Hebrew *qahal*, the assembly of Israel before YHWH.<sup>92</sup> The use of the same term for the church indicates a theology of continuity between the church and Israel. Another New Testament term related to *ekklesia* is *tois hagiois*, “the saints,”<sup>93</sup> a term “used since Daniel 7 to refer to the eschatological people of God.”<sup>94</sup> In 1 Peter 2:9, Peter has no qualms applying other terms used of Israel—“a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people”—to the church.<sup>95</sup>

The theme of the church as Israel is especially important for understanding Paul. Galatians 6:15–16 presents a summary of Paul’s position on the relationship between Jews and Gentiles: “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.” Here the “Israel of God” refers to the church, both Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ, that is, all those who follow the “rule” of the new creation, for whom circumcision or uncircumcision means nothing. This is an expansion of what Paul argues in Galatians 3. For Paul, all who believe in Christ are now the heirs of those chosen in Abraham’s election: “Realize then that it is those who have faith who are children of Abraham. Scripture, which saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, foretold the good news to Abraham, saying, ‘Through you shall all the nations be blessed.’”<sup>96</sup> The heirs of Israel are no longer determined by blood but by faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, “if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendant, heirs according to the promise.”<sup>97</sup> This accords well with Jesus’ saying in Matthew 3:9: “And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones.”<sup>98</sup>

Paul does not believe that Israel had been cast off or replaced by the church. According to Paul’s image in Romans 9:11, the branches that had been cut off the root of Israel could be grafted back on. The church is to remain open to Israel, for the eschatological goal is the gathering of the whole of Israel. The non-believing Jews are not rejected,<sup>99</sup> but will once again be restored to Israel.<sup>100</sup> In the meantime, the believers in Christ are warned not to boast, for they too can be cut off again from Israel, to which they were grafted on by the mercy of God.<sup>101</sup>

92. *Id.*

93. *Acts* 9:13; *Romans* 15:25.

94. Lohfink, *supra* n. 91, at 77.

95. *Peter* 2:9; see also *Exodus* 19:6.

96. *Galatians* 3:7–8.

97. *Galatians* 3:29.

98. *Matthew* 3:9.

99. *Romans* 11:1.

100. *Romans* 11:26–27.

101. *Romans* 11:17–22.

In Pauline theology, the church, as the Body of Christ, reconciles all peoples, regardless of nationality:

For he is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh, abolishing the law with its commandments and legal claims, that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile both with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it.<sup>102</sup>

Membership in the Body of Christ thus creates a new kind of citizenship: "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God. . . ." <sup>103</sup> According to N. T. Wright, Paul's polemic in Galatians, Romans, and throughout his epistles is not against "works righteousness" but "national righteousness," the belief that fleshly Jewish descent guarantees membership in God's covenant people. For Paul, membership in Israel is broken open and extended to all people worldwide through faith in Christ.<sup>104</sup> The Body of Christ is a truly transnational body that does not fit easily within any unitary political order. Wright, Richard Horsley, Dieter Georgi, Neil Elliott, and other major Pauline scholars have argued that Paul's view of the church has deeply political overtones, for it cuts across allegiance to any earthly kingdom or empire.<sup>105</sup> As Wright says, Paul's missionary work

implies a high and strong ecclesiology in which the scattered and often muddled cells of women, men, and children loyal to Jesus as Lord form colonial outposts of the empire that is to be: subversive little groups when seen from Caesar's point of view, but when seen Jewishly an advance foretaste of the time when the earth shall be filled with the glory of the God of Abraham and the nations will join Israel in singing God's praises (cf. Romans 15:7-13). From this point of view, therefore, this counterempire can never be merely critical, never merely subversive. It claims to be the reality of which Caesar's empire is the parody; it claims to be modeling the genuine humanness, not least the justice and peace, and the unity across traditional racial and cultural barriers, of which Caesar's empire boasted.<sup>106</sup>

After the conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity in the fourth century, the position of the church changed from one of subversion to one of privilege. What did not change, however, is the "typical Judeo-

102. *Ephesians* 2:14-16.

103. *Ephesians* 2:19.

104. N.T. Wright, *The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith*, 29 *Tyndale Bulletin* 61 (1978).

105. For essays by these authors and others on this topic, see *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Richard A. Horsley ed., Trinity Intl. Press 1997).

106. N.T. Wright, *Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire in Paul and Politics: Ekklēsia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* 182-83 (Richard A. Horsley ed., Trinity Press Intl. 2000).

Christian splitting” of unitary political authority. Constant conflicts between the church and the civil authority over temporal rule would not subside until the rise of the unitary sovereign state in the modern era. As Schmitt testified, the church would retain an awkward and uncomfortable presence in the political into the twentieth century.

## V. CONCLUSION

I cannot in this brief space provide anything like a complete ecclesiology of the political, but I hope to have said enough to indicate why American exceptionalism is problematic from a Christian theological point of view. When the relationship between God and America becomes unmediated—either in its explicitly or implicitly theological form—the temptation to civil religion and the divinization of the state becomes difficult to resist. The presence of the church as discerning community is necessary to test loyalty to any nation-state against loyalty to God—not the generic god of civil religion, but the God of Jesus Christ.

One contemporary example can perhaps help to make this clear. In the lead up to the Iraq War in 2003, Pope John Paul II, members of the Curia, and bishops worldwide voiced repeated and vigorous opposition to the impending U.S. invasion.<sup>107</sup> Although the Pope did not explicitly make this judgment binding on all Catholics, John Paul II made it clear that the coming war was, as the Papal Nuncio said, “immoral, illegal, unjust”<sup>108</sup> and this was the overwhelming consensus of the bishops.<sup>109</sup> At the same time, prominent politically conservative American Catholic commentators argued—as Schmitt and Webb argue—that judgment of what is a just war and what is not should be left up to the state. The “final judgment” on such matters, according to Michael Novak, belongs to the sovereign state authority.<sup>110</sup> The importance of this debate was not limited to the particulars of the Iraq War. It was rather a very practical application of Schmitt’s key question: Who decides? Most American Catholics were content to ignore the judgment of the Pope and the bishops, and allow the President to decide on

107. For a summary of church diplomatic maneuvers against the war, see Catholic World News, “*We Are Against the War*”: *Vatican Diplomacy Clashed with American Plans*, <http://cwn-ews.com/news/viewstory.cfm?recnum=21626> (accessed Mar. 15, 2006).

108. Papal Nuncio Pio Lagh (quoted in National Catholic Weekly, *Signs of the Times: Papal Envoy Meets Bush*, <http://www.americamagazine.org/catholicnews.cfm?articleTypeID=29&textID=2852&issueID=426> (accessed Mar. 15, 2006)).

109. See for example, the Catholic Peace Fellowship’s collection of statements about the war from Vatican officials and Episcopal conferences at <http://www.catholicpeacefellowship.org/nextpage.asp?m=2028> (accessed Mar. 8, 2006).

110. Michael Novak, *Wrong: War to Topple Saddam is a Moral Obligation*, *The Times* (London) 5 (Feb. 12, 2003); see also George Weigel, *The Just War Case for the War: A Case Can be Made for Using Proportionate and Discriminate Force*, *America: The National Catholic Weekly*, <http://www.americamagazine.org/gettext.cfm?textID=2879&articleTypeID=1&issueID=428> (last accessed Mar. 15, 2006). I respond in my article *At Odds with the Pope: Legitimate Authority and Just Wars*, 10 *Commonweal* 11 (May 23, 2003).

the justice of the war he was about to pursue. If my argument is correct, this is a fundamental mistake. We need the church to perform its crucial role of judging the powers of this earth by the standards of Christ and his gospel, lest God's will and America's will come to be identified.