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City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEW

Van Engen, Abram C., *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism*, Yale University Press, 2020. 379pp. ISBN 978-0300229752. Reviewed by James Calvin Schaap, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of English, Dordt University.

I owe an apology to literally hundreds of students, not because I somehow shipwrecked their lives or clouded their futures, but because I sold them a line on American history that was, somehow, blessedly short-sighted. In my case, the mistake was a kind of blessing because that error in thinking allowed an important investigation into theology and its effects on a society and nation, no small thing in Christian higher education.

Answer me this: where does “American” history begin? “1620—Plymouth Rock,” you say, “the pilgrims. . .you know, Thanksgiving and all of that.” I’d like to believe they would say American history begins in multiple dreams of freedoms—freedom of speech, freedom to worship, freedom to start anew, to begin a life without prejudice.

Could be. It’s as good an answer as any other, but why not say it begins with Jamestown, a Virginia colony in the new country, an enterprise that predates Plymouth, a colony dedicated to making money? Or better yet, why don’t we say that American history begins with what was here long before 1608 or 1620? Why don’t we begin to teach an American history or the history of American literature that begins with the First Nations? A question I never asked—as a student or professor of Early American literature—is why we have so steadfastly created a story that begins with New England Calvinists. Why, through forty years of teaching early American literature, didn’t I?

Several good answers to that question exist, of course. For instance, there were vastly more educated men in New England by the end of the 17th century than there were anywhere else. Educated men write. There’s more literature in New England than Virginia. Jamestown didn’t grow as abundantly, and it never really demonstrated a dedicated mission other than to make its economic spon-

sors happy with the harvest. If there’s a story there, it’s mostly about good, old-fashioned capitalism.

Native America? Just about every one of those early colonizers saw the Indigenous as “in the way,” a sad and savage people who didn’t know how to farm, how to work, how to make money—people who were, therefore, expendable. Start the story with Indians? Don’t be silly.

Abram Van Engen’s *City on a Hill* is its own kind of detective novel. Van Engen, who holds the Stanley Elkins Chair at Washington University in St. Louis, has written a richly researched study of origins, most specifically, the origins of America’s story.

Van Engen’s title isn’t at all unfamiliar. When I hear “a city on a hill,” I think of President Ronald Reagan; but then, you might think of President Barack Obama. That single, famous phrase has gained as much currency in discussions of American progress as any. Van Engen, obviously, agrees.

But what he does in *City on a Hill* is examine not only the source of the line (from a long “sermon” once preached by a Puritan layman named John Winthrop, first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony), but also the line itself, in a study that has literary character—it examines a text closely—in a backdrop of pertinent but largely unnoted American history. It’s an incredible study, readable and wise, with a plot that, just a few pages in, comes to own your attention.

What Van Engen’s meticulous scholarship has done is unpack that famous Winthrop line. But it also reveals, shockingly, how recently that almighty phrase has come to reign in the kingdom of American exceptionalism. Very, very few Americans had even read that sermon in the nation’s first 150 years. It wasn’t even available really.

Today, a single line from that sermon has built its own fortress in American politics.

Furthermore, when Van Engen examines the entire sermon—a read few take on, despite the popularity of that single phrase—what he finds is a “Model of Christian Charity” that a vast number of contemporary readers would find embarrassingly socialistic, Winthrop hammering away at the importance, in a Christian society, of dispensing every form of justice—even economic—equally. Of course, no one talks much about Winthrop’s economics. It’s embarrassing, maybe even un-American.

The arguments in *City on a Hill* devolve from relentless scholarship that suggests, simply by its heft, that the author spent most of his life sitting in archive carrels few others have ever occupied or even seen. The sheer weight of his research is, quite honestly, breathtaking.

There’s much more in Van Engen’s study that I’ve not mentioned, but I can’t help ending with a long quote that addresses the topic he unpacks throughout this fascinating study, a personal assessment of how that famous phrase, “a city on the hill,” operates today, in the Trump era:

In the age of Donald Trump. . . [a] Model of Christian Charity [the text in question] seems to have moved into a new phase. Whereas it once served as the opening text in a tale of American exceptionalism embraced by the Right and adapted by the Left, it now [as of 2019] serves

primarily as a wedge text between two types of conservatives. It separates the Reagan remnant from the tribe of Trump. More than any other document, it seems, Winthrop’s sermon isolates the striking differences between American exceptionalism and America first.

But you shouldn’t think of Abram Van Engen as starkly political. He goes on to say this:

In one form of rhetoric, an American story beginning in Puritan New England made the United States the leading player in a divinely guided history of liberty, leading the world to redemption by modeling and spreading any number of national values. In the other form of rhetoric, the United States has the same two values as every other nation: sovereignty and self-interest, which aim at nothing other than what everyone everywhere is presumed to want—material wealth.

The City on a Hill is a graduate course created out of a single line we’ve very popularly drawn from a long sermon by John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, a Puritan in mind, soul, and body. But don’t be mistaken. By revealing the history of that line and the sermon, and in defining and describing the myriad uses we have made of it, Abram Van Engen’s exceptionally thoughtful study is really talking about us as a nation, and us, the people, individual citizens and human beings, within it.