

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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The topic “religion and politics” can be dealt with on at least three levels:

- one can deal with it within the context of how the role of organized religion and religious organizations can be secured in the sphere of politics
- one can analyze how the public expression of faith affects as one of the political variables the process of political decision making – and to what degree this is the case in the various political fields
- one can scrutinize how far religion determines the cultural fundamentals of a given society and the fundamental perceptions incorporated in the political culture.

The following explanations focus exclusively on the third perspective. A so-called “true story” may give a preliminary idea of what is meant by this. It is said that it happened at the peak of the conflict in Northern Ireland that one night a passer-by was mugged by a disguised fanatic in the city of Belfast and, with a pistol being pointed at his forehead, he saw himself faced all of a sudden with the question: “Catholic or Protestant?” The passer-by, who was not stupid at all, replied: “Neither Catholic nor Protestant – simply atheist” – whereupon the masked man, who in the meantime had become gruff, clearly showed him the gravity of the situation with the words: “Ok, speak up now: Catholic or Protestant atheist?”

This scenario can very well be translated into political sociology. Religion does not only exist as a personal faith and living conviction, but also as an element of political culture, which shapes all people – even the atheist, who completely refuses to commit himself personally to any tenets of faith.

Accordingly, the intention is to advocate (and hopefully illustrate sufficiently in the following) the proposition that the political culture in the US is largely characterized by the major doctrines of Judaism and Christianity, and that completely independent from any personal commitments.

In the course of the translation of these major doctrines into the political culture, that is, the political translation of the myth of creation and of re-

¹ This essay is an adapted version of a lecture given on the occasion of the author’s retirement ceremony at the German Federal Armed Forces Staff and Command College in Hamburg (November 2005). The audience was from the strategic community.

demption, of the apocalypse and eschatology, but in particular in the course of the political translation of the major Jewish doctrines and traditions such as the exodus tradition and the covenant tradition, these doctrines undergo a change. For anything that goes through the process of politics changes: people as well as convictions – and not always for the better.

The results are shown in the following table. They will have to be made more convincing through a detailed analysis.

Table 1. Religion and Politics in the USA

Theological-religious Motives	American Self-image Elements (Civil Religion)	Foreign and Security Policy Connotations
I. Creation Theory: Topic: Natural and Constitutional Order	– Universalism of natural right (“All men are created equal”) – Utopian Hedonism (“Pursuit of Happiness”)	Foreign and security policy as the global enforcement of a “natural” creation order
II. Exodus Theology: Topic: Rule and Emancipation	– “Emigration” as a latent alternative option of action	– Liberation from barbarism in Europe – “Old” Europe and “innocent” America
III. Covenant Theory: Topics: A. Individual and Community	– From the theocracy of the saints to the “chosenness” of the American nation – From the religious individualism of probation to “rugged individualism”	– National sovereignty obsession/ distrust against UN – American “exceptionalism”/ manifest destiny/ American century
B. Past and Future	– America as a Confession Project	– Patriotism and Religion as an element of the “national world of confession”
IV. Theology of Redemption: Topic: Death and Life	– Political Messianism – Presidential and Military Heroism (“They gave their lives that this nation may live”/ “Our Martyred President”)	– The US as a Redeemer Nation/ America’s vicarious power
V. Theology of Spirituality (“Holy Spirit”): Topic: Bottom and top/ Elite and Common Sense	– Ideology of “ordinary people”: + Self-help instead of expert help + Common sense instead of intellectuality + Grass-root democracy instead of Elites democracy	– Populist Moralization of Politics
VI. Apocalypse/ Eschatology (The End of all Things): Topic: Progress and Disaster	→ Post- millenarian optimism: → “I have a dream” (Progress as a mission) → Pre-millenarian Apocalyp- tics: → (The secret “sense” of disinte- gration, disaster, and war	– Universalization of the Western culture/ The End of History (Fukuyama) – Fundamentalist Militancy/ Clash of Civilizations (Huntington)

I. Creation Theology: On the Relationship between Natural Order and Constitutional Order

The Creation myth is of fundamental importance. All the Fathers of the Constitution were “enlighteners” –, which means that in religious terms they were so-called “deists”. They largely believed in a Creator rather than a redeemer. They all are convinced to be able to see without any doubt what this creator wants from man. Typical in this context is the famous Declaration of Independence of 1776, which was written by Thomas Jefferson. The sentence which is quoted most often reads:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”²

This declaration has to be read on two levels:

1. People’s lives, liberty and individual pursuit of happiness are guaranteed by the God-given order of creation or nature. They are “self-evident truths”, their God-given foundation cannot be refuted by any form of reason.

2. At first sight that may sound absolute and, thus, potentially totalitarian. At second sight, though, these “self-evident truths are qualified as a collective consensus: “we hold these truths to be self-evident...” – which means, we believe in them, we hold on to them. An absolute statement is turned back into subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Therefore, absolute truths only make sense if they can be made collectively credible. Collective convictions in turn are the basis of a constitutional order. Between the objective order of creation and the binding constitutional order there are the cultural processes of reaching a consensus which underpins the natural order of creation.

If one considers US foreign and security policy from this perspective, it is first of all nothing else but the attempt of the enforcement of a “natural” social and political order at a global level in which everybody is to be guaranteed equality, liberty and the individual pursuit of happiness (whatever else he may consider to be right and true) as unalienable rights. This, however, quite frequently involves the conviction that the natural social order will prevail automatically without taking any cultural efforts to reach an understanding (if only all presumable obstacles to equality, liberty and individual happiness are eliminated – possibly by military means if need be). Of course, this latter assumption does not often work in reality. The situation in Iraq shows this most clearly. Without the cultural processes of reaching a

² Quoted in: **Dick de Vos**. *Rediscovering American Values: The Foundations of Our Freedom in the 21st Century*. New York: The Penguin Group, 1997, pp. 36f.

political consensus no natural order and none of the Jeffersonian “self-evident truths” will be implemented here. The “we hold”-precaution in the Declaration of Independence can’t be taken too seriously. The process of mutual understanding and consensus building has to prevail over whatever absolute truth one may hold on to.

2. Mythology of Redemption

The topic of the Fathers of the Constitution was the relationship between natural order and constitutional order, between the intentions of the Creator and the propositions of the Constitution. However, the Christian Credo does not only know the Creator but also the Redeemer. In this context, what is at issue in Christian-dogmatic terms is the sacrificial death of Christ – his vicarious suffering and dying. In more general religious-philosophical terms, it is about the relationship between life and death – or more precisely: how life and death are intertwined and how linking the dead and living brings about community.

Two developments have occurred in the US which the Europeans haven’t reproduced yet and in fact cannot even appreciate:

1. In the US, the idea of a Messianic redeemer figure (a figure that represents and reconstitutes life, liberty and pursuit of happiness to its full measure) has detached itself from religious contexts and has been transferred to political contexts which finally has resulted in the awareness of the US of having a Messianic mission herself. “Long enough have we been sceptics with regard to ourselves and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in us, if we would give utterance to his promptings”³ – as Herman Melville puts it in his book “White Jacket” (1850). With the Messiah, that is, with the US, a new time and a new era have begun – as the One-Dollar note of the United States reads: “novus ordo seclorum.” Accordingly, in terms of substance, this Messianic dream about liberty and self-governance for all, about human rights and peace everywhere, ultimately revolves around civilizing and perfecting the entire world.

2. But this Messianic dream does not only have this self-confident, enlightening and sometimes even pretentious side – it also has a dark metaphysical side: In a direct analogy to Christ’s sacrificial death, the political conviction prevails that liberty and self-governance do not only need rational reasons to make sure that they become valid, but also the steadfast connection of remembrance between those who may live in liberty and those who have died for this very liberty. On the very Civil War battlefield of Gettys-

³ **Herman Melville.** Weißjackete (White Jacket, 1850). Leipzig, 1954, S. 211f.

burg, famous President Lincoln found words which to this day are a model for this dark metaphysical side of American Messianism: “They gave their lives that the nation may live.” He combined that with the expectation “that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom – and that this government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.”⁴

Lincoln himself was later compared to Jesus – after all, he, too, was murdered on a Good Friday; since then, he has been “our martyred President.” The assassination of other presidents (such as Kennedy) or public leaders (such as M. Luther King) easily follows the pattern of the resurrection of liberty through sacrificial death – which on Memorial Day is conspicuously transferred to the representative sacrificial death of all US soldiers killed in action.

3. Exodus Theology

Exodus generally means “departure.” In the biblical-Old Testament tradition, though, the departure or exodus was something very specific in historical terms: the exodus of the Israeli tribes from Egyptian-Pharaonic slavery. For the first Puritan settlers in America, this historical fact was the model and the blueprint for their own identity. For these first Americans, Europe was some kind of Pharaonic Egypt, which they had left behind – a continent of barbarism and corruption, a trouble spot of religious intolerance, feudalistic bondage and lots of wars – in short: the epitome of misery and disorder. “Exodus,” “emigration” has become such a formative element of American identity that it applies not only in the domain of foreign policy but also in the domestic sphere.

To this day, the Exodus perspective has remained formative and relevant in the external perspective and in particular for the American perspective on Europe. Basically Europe has always remained “Old Europe” – cynical at best, corrupt, unable to keep peace or to restore it on its own at worst: For Americans, Bosnia and the Kosovo are only the most recent illustrations of this old fact. If there is currently also a “New Europe” in the eyes of Americans, then it is only because particularly the East-Europeans dare for a new political start together with the US.

⁴ A. Lincoln, quoted in: **Jürgen Moltmann**. Die „Erlöser-Nation“ – Religiöse Wurzeln des US-amerikanischen Exzeptionalismus. – Die Friedenswarte. Journal of International Peace and Organization, Heft 2–3/2003, S. 161.

But “emigration” also has been and will remain a latent and always present alternative to action in the domestic sphere: Just think of the big migration movement to the West, think of the willingness to seek happiness even in the seventh marriage (L. Taylor) or the willingness to “follow,” as it were, the job offers by means of geographic mobility, even if one finally winds up in a trailer city. Accordingly, people here are “on the road” much more as a matter of principle. The road is not only the link between two geographical locations; it is a preferred social location in itself. To be on the road again: that means liberation from the constraints of ordinary civilization – at times even accompanied by the escape into the worlds of gambling or even away from the legal order into the world of crime. Just think of Bonnie and Clyde.

4. Covenant Theology

Another biblical motive pertaining to the Old Testament is that of Israel’s covenant with Yahweh, her God. The basic tenor of this motive is: Israel gets land, “Holy Land”; in turn, it commits itself to obey and to keep the laws of the covenant with her God and, thus, to be a holy and chosen people. The first American settlers saw their situation similarly. The experiment of the Puritans on American soil was to translate their concept of a holy covenant with God and of a community of saints and chosen people into social and political reality.

This experiment was extremely problematic – for it meant in terms of social practice to make political rights (for instance, the right to vote) as well as economic rights (for instance, land acquisition rights) dependent, as it were, on religious qualification, that is, in concrete terms on an official certificate of orthodoxy and a disciplined and pious conduct of life.

This immediately provoked two reactions. The first one concerns the relationship between the individual and the community, the second one the relationship between past and future. Both have to be taken into account.

4.1. Individual and Community

The vital economic and political interests of individuals cannot be suppressed in the long run. Nobody puts up with permanently being excluded from politics and the economy on the grounds that he lacks the requisite extent of piety and holiness. Accordingly, this resulted in a first dynamic of compromise over time. Social pressure increased to lower the obstacles for orthodoxy and a pious conduct of life. First of all, all upright individuals and all good-willed people thereupon were granted the status of religious cho-

senness; later the obstacles were lowered even more until finally the conviction prevailed that the very fact of being a Protestant American justified the assumption of special chosenness. Finally, chosenness was no longer a characteristic that differentiated saints from stubborn sinners who cannot be converted but a characteristic of the American nation as such which opposed it to other, “inferior nations.”

Then, after all, the distinction between saints and sinners was based on the background of the dramatic distinction between the divine selection of the ones and the infernal damnation of the others. Of course, such dramatics of salvation history questions one’s self-assurance. Where am I really situated? Are there perhaps any indications in this life as to my future eternal fate? After all, an official certificate of having stood the religious test cannot have the power to ease fears. But perhaps the entirely secular economic success will have this power? The proof is provided e contrario. Would it make sense to become a rich businessman with God’s help only to be eternally damned anyway in the end? No – economic success has to be an indication that God still has further plans with me. And to this day economic success in the US involves some kind of religious anointment. Americans want to make more money rather than have longer vacations. And to this day you can hear on religious channels in the US what cannot be heard anywhere else in the world: “God wants you to be rich.” But even for those who do not want to subscribe to that “rugged individualism”, i.e. the uncompromising pursuit of one’s own interests, success not failure justifies life, makes sense of life and guarantees appreciation in the community. Both the concept of the chosenness of the American nation and the idea of primarily pursuing one’s own interests have strongly influenced American foreign and security policy. In the concept of American “exceptionalism,” the notion has prevailed that America is outside the normal course of world history and has a special status, a “status specialis,” which does not befit other nations. Additionally, the primary pursuit of one’s own interests is accompanied by the well-known motto “America first” as well as by all forms of obsession with national sovereignty. The fundamental distrust of the United Nations is going along with it – up to the assumption that the United Nations is the incarnation of the antichrist.

4.2. Past and Future

The idea of a covenant is also responsible for another facet of self-perception of the US – the image of America as a project focusing on a binding creed. You have to champion the covenant. America as an immigration country thrives on the willingness of the immigrants to abandon old ties and to

accept new ones. In his day, President Johnson put this in an exemplary manner: “They came here – the exiled and the stranger, brave but frightened – to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish.”⁵

The political message of this text is clear: America is not just any given country. America is a project, and this project thrives on a kind of religious national patriotism, which is made universal and, thus, is capable of inspiring the hopes of mankind as a whole. Consequently, patriotism and religion belong to the inalienable assets of the national world of creed; Americans are affirmative – Europeans are sceptical. Therefore, religion in Europe has to come across in a discursive and reflexive manner, that is, in the form of doubt and skepticism – but at least of reflectiveness –, whereas in America this is exactly what is undesirable and even almost offensive.

5. Theology of Spirituality

The issue of an affirmative creed is closely connected to the issue of conscience. We have said: Covenant faith begins with the attempt to translate the ideal of a “community of saints” into a political order, that is, into a collectively binding and socially controllable form of lifestyle. But what happens if the insight dawns on one’s mind that the ideal of a “community of saints” is not achieved primarily by means of social control of the faithful’s religious conduct of life or by means of dogmatic control of the purity of doctrine but rather through an community of believers that thrives on the authentic power of the conscience and on subjective spiritual experience?

Now this is where the second option appears within the context of the problem of how religious orientation can be translated into social practice. The first alternative had already been addressed. It consists, as already mentioned, of the democratization of the Puritan claim to differ from the human average by means of a religiously obliging conduct of life. Finally, the democratization of this claim resulted in a form of secularization which is rather irritating for Europeans, that is, the attitude of “Somehow we as Americans (and no longer as Puritans!) are something special after all.” This can be named the objectivized version of the Covenant-tradition – in contrast to the subjectized one, which comes into play where the claim to be a community of the saints is interpreted in the framework of individual spiritual

⁵ L. B. Johnson, quoted in: **Klaus-M. Kodalle**. *Zivilreligion in Amerika*. – **Klaus-M. Kodalle** (ed.), *Gott und Politik in den USA*, Frankfurt, 1988, S. 29

experience. This finally results in a dynamics where everybody is authorized and encouraged to pursue his own religious way – and accordingly in the rejection of any kind of patronizing by clerical élites and the clerical establishment; in the positive sense, however, it then results in the high esteem and the appreciation of the common man in the street, in a basic trust in the common sense of the common man, a basic trust in his lack of need of moral and religious indoctrination. In sociological terms, the result of this process can be witnessed in the endless pluralistic fragmentation of the religious landscape – in the downright immense variety of denominations, sects, religious orientations and practices.

Of course, this has also implications for everyday social life. In social terms, subjectivization results in the highly topical phenomenon of self-help (instead of expert help) as well as in all the attempts to get something going from the bottom, that is, to act from the grass roots level instead of waiting for insights and initiatives coming from the top. Implications are also evident in the domains of foreign and security policies. All in all, the political system is basically much more open to protest attitudes and activities from the bottom. Constituency interests are therefore more significant than the highly diffuse and highly aggregated party interests. Political candidates also depend more strongly on grass-roots support than on support by the party. For instance, an attitude of outrage and protest at the grass-roots level was the reason for the eventual termination of the Vietnam War – and it cannot be ruled out that in the case of the war in Iraq, too, a populist moralization of the American commitment will occur. This may happen quickly and surprisingly, and then even the strategists in the Pentagon would no longer stand any chance. So far we have only been watching the phenomenon of populist “moralization” from the top. I dare to doubt whether this will continue to stay that way.

6. Eschatology (the doctrine of final things)

Eschatology means: Individual and collective fates, events and experiences have to be interpreted in the light of ultimate truths. We are quite familiar with such “eschatology” in a secular form.

Entire political systems – such as, for instance, the socialist systems – were based on the assumption that it is possible to presume a meaningful, forward-oriented process resulting in a positive end of history. But apart from socialist premises all of us make assumptions of progress: for instance that actually the economic development can only continue to keep proceeding upward or that everybody must be entitled in biographical terms to live up to

and represent his individual potential or that one's children should have a better life than oneself.

Such exceptions regarding the historical process as a whole, with regard to the economic development, to the right of biographical fulfillment and of family aspirations are so self-evident to us that indeed we are no longer aware of them as a western-cultural feature. Yet in fact the paradigm of progress being reflected here is a typically western cultural product.

It is due to a cultural background fulfillment, which is Christian and primarily understands history as a chain of events controlled by God, which range from the creation to the end of all things. Now what is typical of America is not the replacement of a religiously defined concept of progress by purely secular definitions of progress, as it has occurred in Europe. What is typical is rather the continuous applicability of religious beliefs of the end of history in addition to purely secular concepts and on closer inspection even a conspicuous correspondence of religious and secular versions of progress and the end of history. Essentially, there is an optimistic and a pessimistic version of this in the US – both in the religious and secular cultures.

6.1. Optimistic Version

In the US, the religious concept of a millennium of peace at the end of all times is alive – and closely connected to the belief in the return of Christ. By way of practiced altruism by means of the implementation of a truly Christian society, one can grow, as it were into this millennium of peace. Everything we know as “voluntarism” or charity culture in America is based on such motives. Be it voluntary work in the fire or police service, in retirement homes or in kindergarten, in private neighborhood security companies or work for socially deprived and homeless people – everywhere you can do something which makes this society more human and more Christian and which accords consistency to the idea of the ultimate achievement of a millennium of peace. Of course, one can also enter everything into this category which appears to us as an American oddity: the fierce combat against homosexuality, pornography and abortion, the struggle for family values, (that is, for the patriarchy) and for classroom prayers, and occasionally also the bizarre fight against “impious” scientific beliefs such as Darwinism – that is, the entire “zealotic” character which we recently have come to connote more and more strongly with America. The leftist version of this historical optimism was dear to us in the 1960s and 1970s: It was Martin Luther King's “I have a dream” vision of a better America and a better world. In the foreign and security policy field, this eschatological idea has been formulated just recently with considerable emphasis. The historian Francis Fukuyama

used the end of the East-West confrontation as a secular opportunity to talk about the end of history, the arrival in a better world which historically cannot be overtaken.

“What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or is the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind 's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”⁶

Where only western liberal democracy is left, progress is completed, and – this should presumably be concluded – the millennium of peace can come (although according to Fukuyama this is most certainly conceived to come without the return of Christ).

6.2. Pessimism towards Progress

Fukuyama obviously was wrong. History continued completely differently. It even continued in a more dramatic form than we would have thought. September 11, 2001 represents all we are facing in terms of challenges - terrorism, a potential struggle of cultures, and the collapse of political, economic and social ordering structures in many places in the world. September 11 aggravated fears, spread insecurity and invoked concepts of an enormous collapse of the world order. In such a critical situation, the second version of the idea of the end of all things takes hold in America – and in terms of its dogmatics, this version is apocalyptic and militantly oriented in terms of its concrete application. Of course, this requires more detailed explanation and illustration.

Just like the optimistic (postmillenarian) reasoning, the pessimistic and apocalyptic reasoning also adheres to the idea of a millennium of peace. But in apocalyptic reasoning, the concept is formative that the millennium of peace can only be established after enormous conflicts between the powers of Light and Darkness – no talk about going creepingly and peacefully into that millennium any longer.

This way it is possible to attribute a constructive meaning also to events which apparently make no sense and even to disasters. They are now interpreted as throes of a new era – unavoidable but of foreseeable duration. Therefore, perseverance is the order of the day – or put differently: Disasters

⁶ F. Fukuyama, quoted in: **Karl-Sebastian Schulte**. Der politische Diskurs der Apokalypse in den USA, Berlin, 2001, S. 43.

are afflictions, but in the furnace of the afflictions precious metal is separated from mere waste. Therefore, confidence is appropriate.

The actual problems only become apparent in the course of the politico-social reification of such abstract metaphors. Immediately after September 11, 2001, fundamentalists declared in an apocalyptic manner the American way of life to be cultural waste. Falwell: "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), People Of the American Way – all of them who have tried to secularize America – I point the finger in their faces and say you helped this happen."⁷

For the American mainstream, of course, this is a downright outrageous statement. It is much more convincing, of course, to identify the apocalyptic chaos and cultural waste where the quality of the American way of life is fundamentally questioned: among the militant Islamists and terrorists. G. W. Bush has enforced this perception of things. But how is such an apocalyptic pattern of interpretation translated into practical political action? Well, it means the acceptance of a form of militancy, which no longer accepts the traditional procedures of the containment of violence. Put pointedly: Traditional international law and the international law of war are hardly suitable for conflicts of apocalyptic scope – hence Guantánamo and Abu Ghuraib and the like.

From a security and foreign policy perspective, the political scientist Samuel Huntington has championed such a world view as early as the 1990s – that is, before September 11 – which follows to a considerable extent the apocalyptic pattern of interpretation. He states as the currently last phase in the bellicose history of mankind the conflict between different cultures, a clash of civilizations – and the most conflict-prone line of conflict is that between the West and Islam, although, finally it is an all-encompassing conflict which pitches "the West versus the rest."⁸

Although Huntington does not explicitly say so, it is clear that it is an apocalyptic conflict between the powers of the Good and the Evil. In this apocalyptic vision, we currently also experience an essential concern of the so-called "Religious Right." Of course, the apocalyptic interpretation of history may set us thinking. However, it has also to be stated in turn: There is a lot more in the relationship between religion, politics and society in the US than what is currently worrying us within the context of the "Religious Right." This essay tried to illustrate just that.

⁷ J. Falwell, quoted in: **Steve Benen**. Backlash to bigotry. – Church and State, 9/2001, pp. 10 ff.

⁸ **S. Huntington**. The Clash of Civilizations? – Foreign Affairs, 3/1993, p. 39.

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