

Redeemer Nation and Lost Cause Religion:
Making America Great Again (For the First Time)
Protestant Privilege and American Exceptionalism Then and Now
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An intelligent foreigner, making his observations at Washington at this time, would be puzzled to determine whether the Americans had a Government, or not. . . . It is a remarkable fact that at Washington today, there is not a single well-defined department of political power!¹

Southerner Edward Pollard wrote those words in 1867, in a volume in which he coined the term “Lost Cause,” and set about re-mythologizing the post-Appomattox Confederacy. Efforts to “make America great AGAIN” are not unique to the current president of the United States. In almost every era of our country’s history, someone has lamented the departure of American “greatness,” fretting that national oblivion, if not divine retribution, was at hand. Still others, dissenters mostly, continually warn that claims of “greatness” themselves betray a certain national hubris, a blindness to promises made but not yet kept. Their dissenting mantra might well be: “Making American Great Again FOR THE FIRST TIME.”

The rhetoric of America as Redeemer Nation was there from the start, an exceptionalism often linked to a covenant with the Divine, particularly among certain Protestant immigrants. Boston Puritan John Winthrop’s 1630 treatise, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” declared:

Wee shall finde that the God of Israel is among us, when tenn of us shall be a led to resist a thousand of our enemies, when hee shall make us a prayse and glory, that men shall say

¹ Edward A. Pollard, *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* Facsimile of the original 1867 edition (New York: Bonanza Books, 749).

of succeeding plantations: the lord make it like that of New England: for we must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us. . .”²

American history is filled with Exceptionalism and Lost Causes, sources of national or regional **identity** repeatedly mythologized, demythologized, and re-mythologized. “A myth,” Mark Shorer wrote, “is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is, which has organizing value for experience.”³ Myths give meaning to our common existence; they tell us who we are, where we fit, or where we don’t.

Today we explore the religious roots and contemporary implications of two mythic elements of national and regional distinctiveness: Redeemer Nation Exceptionalism, and Lost Cause “religion.” American Exceptionalism, Godfrey Hodgson writes, “is the idea that the United States has a destiny and a duty to expand its power and the influence of its institutions and its beliefs until they dominate the world.”⁴ Religionists from Jonathan Edwards to Joel Osteen have understood that mission as “divinely ordained.”⁵ The myth of American Exceptionalism continues, Ian Tyrrell notes, but “it does not rest on one particular creation story or narrative,” but “is more akin to a cluster of stories” that provide support for “**pseudo-analytical** judgments about American national identity.”⁶ But such mythic identity may not hold

² John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” in Conrad Cherry, ed., *God’s New Israel*, 43.

³ Mark Shorer, “The Necessity for Myth,” in *Myth and Mythmaking*, ed. Henry A. Murray (Boston: Beacon, 1960), 355.

⁴ Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 10.

⁵ Stephen M. Walt, “The Myth of American Exceptionalism,” *Foreign Policy* no. 189 (November 2011), 74.

⁶ Ian Tyrrell, “What is American exceptionalism?”, <https://iantyrrell.wordpress.com/papers-and-comments/>.

forever; there are always prophets and other dissenting weirdos who challenge them on the spot. Myths that write people in, often write other people out.

Which brings us to the **Lost Cause**, a term originating “as a byword for the perpetuation of the Confederate ideal,” that became a mindset for “justifying the southern experience.”⁷ Introduced to explain the South’s defeat and memorialize its honored dead (hence the statues), it morphed into a broader method for undergirding racial segregation, denying blacks’ voting rights, and promoting culturally entrenched white supremacy, zombie mindsets that stalk us yet.

Why explore such communal consciousness at this moment in American politics and religion? Three months ago when I proposed this topic it seemed important because **seven out of ten** Americans—regardless of political affiliation—say that the land of the free and the home of the brave is losing its sense of shared identity, even a minimal consensus on who we are and what holds us together.⁸ Right now, a single word defines the importance of today’s topic: Charlottesville. The rise in religion-related hate crimes, white supremacy rhetoric, KKK rallies, and race-based deviations in voting laws, suggest that some of the worst Lost Cause-oriented ideologies are not LOST at all in 21st century America.

Recalibrating multiple myths of American democracy was at the heart of Donald Trump’s election. His slogan, “Making America Great Again,” captures these two themes of national consciousness: American exceptionalism, the unique place of the US in world history; and Trump’s own Lost Cause “deconstruction,” in an “America first” ideology, with decidedly racist overtones. Many of the 81% of Evangelical voters who supported Trump apparently hoped he would renew America’s divine entitlement as Redeemer Nation, restoring the country’s faith

⁷ Thomas L. Connelly and Barbara L. Bellows, *God and General Longstreet: The Lost Cause and the Southern Mind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982),2-3.

⁸ “Poll: Americans fret losing identity,” *Winston-Salem Journal*, March 6, 2017, A8.

foundation in Christian orthodoxy and morality. Franklin Graham, a son of the great evangelist, touted Trump's election as evidence of a "Divine hand" in American political affairs; while Dallas pastor Robert Jeffress compared Trump to Nehemiah who built a wall to protect Jerusalem.⁹ Others, like North Carolina pastor William Barber challenge that vision, warning against those who "deny the God-given humanity and the human rights of individuals and then stack the courts to protect themselves and their power and then put pornographic sums of money into the political structure in order to dominate it." Barber concluded, "I can tell you, Caesar still lives."¹⁰

Debates over "religion and the Republic" thunder across American history. Is America a Christian nation? A Judeo-Christian nation? A nation grounded in three great Abrahamic faiths? A post-Christian nation, rapidly "going secular?" Or a materialistic Banana Republic that uses religion as political sound and fury signifying nothing?

American chosen-ness, Earnest Lee Tuveson wrote, had "two kinds of expectations" **for early settlers:** America as "New Rome" or as "Promised Land of a chosen people." As New Rome, America would compete with historically superior cultures in matters of literature, art, and overall cultural ascendancy. As Chosen People, it would resist Old World political and theological corruption, forging at last a true Christian civilization and nationhood.¹¹

This spiritual mission appears throughout American Protestantism, echoed in Jonathan Edwards' 18th century assertion that colonial religious awakenings gave "us more abundant reason to hope that what is now seen in America, and especially in New England, may prove the dawn of that glorious day" of Christ's return.¹²

In his 1835 treatise, "A Plea for the West," preacher/educator Lyman Beecher insisted that,

⁹ "Rev. Jeffress: Trump Like Jeremiah who God Called to build Wall Around Jerusalem," <http://insider.foxnews.com/2017/01/20/robert-jeffress-trump-nehemiah-god-called-build-wall-jerusalem>.

¹⁰ Cleve R. Woodson, Jr., "Rev. William Barber Builds a Moral Movement," *Washington Post*, June 29, 2017; Steven Paulikas, "Christianity Does Not Justify Trump's 'Fire and Fury,'" August 14, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/08/14/opinion.

¹¹ Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role*

¹² Jonathan Edwards, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England,"

“all the existing signs of the times,” corroborated Edwards’ belief “that the millennium would commence in America,” and that the country had achieved the “moral power to **evangelize the world.**”¹³

Twentieth century evangelical leader Harold Ockenga, reaffirmed that divine calling, declaring in a 1943 sermon: “The United States of America has been assigned a destiny comparable to that of ancient Israel which was favored, preserved, endowed, guided and used of God.”¹⁴

Yet **dissent** over the **Redeemer Nation metaphor** was also present from the beginning, personified by the quintessential dissenter, Roger Williams. Williams was clear: there are no Christian nations, only Christian people, united to Christ not by citizenship, but by faith.

When KJV Puritans claimed Psalm 2, verse 8, “Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost part of the earth for thy possession,” as Redeemer Nation proof text, Williams responded for himself and the Native Americans with whom he lived and worked:

*When Indians heare the horrid filths, of Irish, English Men,
The horrid Oaths and Murthers late, Thus say these Indians then:
We weare no Cloaths, have many Gods, And yet our sinnes are lesse.
YOU are Barbarians, Pagans wild, Your Land’s the Wildernesse.*¹⁵

I think of that 1643 doggerel each time I listen to Morning Joe.

Williams’ own critique of national chosen-ness was based on the idea that whenever a nation claims to be elected, some citizens always get left out, either because they are not Christian or because they are the wrong kind of Christians. To this day Americans tend to grant our much touted religious liberty GRUDGINGLY to faith-based newcomers, sectarians or outsiders.

- 1660—Mary Dyer, Quaker preacher executed in Boston.

¹³ Lyman Beecher, A Plea for the West,” in Conrad Cherry, editor, *God’s New Israel*, 120.

¹⁴ Harold J. Ockenga, “Christ for America,” May 1943, 11, 13-14, sermon manuscript, cited in Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 283.

¹⁵ Roger Williams, *A Key to the Language of America*, ed. John J. Tuenissen and Evelyn J. Hinz (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), 204.

- 1768—Baptist preachers jailed in Fredericksburg, VA
- 1844—Joseph Smith, Mormon founder, shot in Illinois.
- 1855, August 6, Bloody Monday, Louisville, Anti-Catholic mobs attack German and Italian immigrants to keep them from voting.
- 1948: Jehovah’s Witness children compelled to say the pledge of allegiance or be expelled from public schools.
- 1963, KKK bombs Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Birmingham, 4 girls killed.
- 2012—Sikh Temple, Oak Creek, Wisconsin, white supremacist murders six people.
- 2015—white supremacist slaughters 9 people in Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Charleston.
- August 2017—Bombing Dar Al-Farooq Islamic Centre, Bloomington, Minnesota!
- August 2017: Charlottesville, Neo-Nazis chanting: “Jews will not replace us!”

The racial, ethnic, and immigrant injustices of a Redeemer Nation are writ large in the Lost Cause, a metaphor by which the defeated southerners cast “the [Civil] war and its outcome in the best possible terms,” “often factually and chronologically distorting the way in which the past would be remembered.” These “alternative facts” minimized or dismissed the role of slavery as a reason for a war fought in response to “‘Yankee aggression,’ and black ‘betrayal.’”¹⁶

Alan Nolan calls the Lost Cause “a rationalization, a cover-up,” that created a “**sense of advocacy**” to preserve the South’s “defensive posture” that Civil War was NOT about slavery, but state’s rights and “sectionalism.”¹⁷ Lost Cause ideologues theorized that “if the Confederacy could not have won [the war], it somehow did not lose.”¹⁸

Southern white Protestantism was a major force in promoting Lost Cause religion. As Connelly and Bellows write: “The rising tide of evangelical faith, witnessed in the phenomenal

¹⁶ Carolyn E. Janney, *Burying the ‘Dead but Not the Past’: Ladies’ Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 3.

¹⁷ Alan T. Nolan, “The Anatomy of the Myth,” in Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, editors, *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 17.

growth of the Southern Baptist Church and other fundamentalist churches, gave solace and structure to the defeated Confederate generation.”¹⁹ In *Baptized in Blood, the Religion of the Lost Cause*, Charles Reagan Wilson writes that “as guardians of the region’s spiritual and moral heritage,” southern ministers “used the Lost Cause to buttress this heritage.” Wilson insists that, “Christian clergymen were the prime celebrants of the religion of the Lost Cause.”²⁰

While Lost Cause advocates attempted to rewrite the South back into national identity, they also portrayed the South as the **prime preserver** of America as Redeemer Nation. Thus, the people who lost the war, retained the vision. The Southern people, even in defeat, would be more moral, more “Christian,” and more “American” than their Yankee counterparts had been or ever could be.²¹

Yet underneath the rhetoric of moralism, sectionalism, and theological orthodoxy was the abiding scourge of racism. Lost Cause religion facilitated the formation of the Ku Klux Klan, whose violent racism was romanticized in books like *The Clansman*, written in 1905 by Baptist preacher, and Wake Forest graduate, Thomas Dixon, to describe how “the young South, led by the reincarnated souls of the Clansmen of Old Scotland, . . . saved the life of a people,” and formed “one of the most dramatic chapters in the history of the ARYAN race.”²²

In August 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, another Baptist preacher, Martin Luther King, Jr. assessed the inadequacies of Redeemer Nation and Lost Cause mythologies, challenging the nation to make America Great Again **for the First Time**. Said King:

¹⁹ Thomas L. Connelly and Barbara L. Bellows, *God and General Longstreet*, 6.

²⁰ Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 11.

²¹ Bill J. Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing, 1990),

²² Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1970, 1905), 2.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.

In a sense we've come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. . . . It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."²³

Dr. King's words prompt conclusions to today's address, commentary aimed primarily at the students and faculty of this divinity school, but the rest of you are welcome to listen in.

First, can you learn to read YOUR culture with a sense of history? As teachers, preachers, chaplains, community organizers, human beings can you locate today's rhetoric of American exceptionalism, Christian Nation, or racism masquerading as voter reform, within the historical

²³ Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkhaveadream.htm>.

context that birthed them? Can you understand and analyze the roots of white supremacy, internet racism and anti-Semitism, distinguishing “alternative facts” from “alternative interpretations?” If we don’t provide you with additional academic, even gospel, tools for doing that, we’ll fail you badly.

Second, can you distinguish between Christian conviction and culture prejudice, particularly when using THE BIBLE for support? Many elements of Redeemer Nation and Lost Cause religion were rooted in perverse, distorted, immoral, unethical, crooked (I ran the thesaurus here) biblical hermeneutics, interpretative methods that gave proof texts for supporting Manifest Destiny exploitation of Indians, chattel slavery, Jim Crow separatism, and white privilege. Such bastardized Biblicism (I’m retiring next year; I can talk like that) showed up this month when the pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, touted Romans chapter 13 as divine sanction for Mr. Trump to “take out” the North Korean leader, using assassination, and other dark arts, as necessary.²⁴ What if the theory of biblical inerrancy helps get us all nuked?

Third, can you cultivate gospel dissent, contesting the ways in which religious communities cut deals with the culture? Edwin Gaustad wrote: “This reform of religion in the name of religion, this growing edge, this refusal to let well enough alone, is the role of dissent.” It “may also be a manifestation of the unfettered human spirit.”²⁵ And sometimes dissent becomes irrevocably prophetic. Cathleen Kaveny writes that prophets provide a “kind of *moral chemotherapy* . . . a brutal but necessary response to aggressive forms of moral malignancy,”²⁶

²⁴ “Pastor Robert Jeffress, ‘God has Given Trump Authority to Take out Kim Jong-Un,’” August 8, 2017, www.firstdallas.org.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 4-5.

²⁶ Cathleen Kaveny, *Prophecy Without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

(312) In the church and in the world be ready to dissent at a moment's notice; but be prophetic when injustice is so rampant that if you don't speak the stones will cry out.

Finally, might we ALL listen to Roger Williams and Ann Hutchinson, Frederick Douglas and Harriet Tubman, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, and oh yes, Jesus, in understanding America, not as Redeemer Nation, but as **Beloved Community**? In August 1963, Dr. King reminded us that the existence of slavery alone meant that the idea of a Redeemer Nation was broken from the start, a promissory note marked "insufficient funds." But King did not lose hope: "I have a dream," he said, "that **one day** this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that ALL . . .are created equal."²⁷ Fifty-four Augusts later, that creed REMAINS unfulfilled for so many. Fifty-four Augusts later can we mirror Dr. King's courage by confronting a renewed Lost Cause ideology spewed out in white supremacy-KKK-Nazi bigotry made tangible in torch light parades, "blood and soil" mantras, and the murder of a 32-year-old dissenter? If the hope of a Beloved Community means anything at all, then Heather Heyer must not have died in vain.

This Divinity School began in 1999 with an audacious mission to help students and faculty learn to live as "agents of justice, reconciliation, and compassion." That's the language of a Beloved Community, language that these days seems like a really Lost Cause, hope as inconceivable as a stone cold Galilean, laid out in a borrowed tomb, waiting on Sunday morning, for the audacious grace of God. Amen.

²⁷ Ibid.

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