

# 11

## The United States: Messianism, Apocalypticism, and Political Religion

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I believe...that an unbridled passion for the total elimination of this or that evil can be as dangerous as any of the delusions of our time.

—Richard Hofstadter<sup>1</sup>

Can a nation of civilized religions and civil religion produce political religions? Why should the United States be an exception? Beyond the marginal totalitarian groups that we easily identify as political religions, however, is a larger question of how an American sense of messianic destiny continuously pushes social and political movements toward political religion, in ways that periodically gain mass support and influence public policy.

The tendency toward political religion in the United States is fed by the apocalyptic and messianic tradition brought to our shores by certain forms of Protestantism and the legacy of a civil religion that incorporates a messianic vision of national historic destiny. This makes it difficult to separate a national identity from a national ideology. Richard Hofstadter once quipped, 'In earlier days, after all, it had been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one.'<sup>2</sup> Alas, it is too soon to consign this tendency to 'earlier days.'

American exceptionalism was conceptualized by Alexis de Tocqueville, and it helped produce what Gunnar Myrdal labeled the 'American Creed,' later clarified by Robert N. Bellah who explained that, 'there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America.'<sup>3</sup> This creed extols individualism, limited government, religious belief, patriotism, the constitutional republic, and a 'free market.'

The salience of civil religion in public and political life varies over time, surfing historic currents and waving with the flag. During America's bicentennial celebrations, John M. Mulder, a theologian, observed that:

The Bicentennial and civil religion pose once again a perpetual dilemma for the church. Sermons can be preached against the identification of religion with politics, of the church blessing the state, of 'piety along the Potomac.' Such sermons would help to check the possibilities of a 'revivified' civil religion.<sup>4</sup>

Check but not checkmate. Consider the present situation. For some in America, it is time to return to the good old days, even if those days never really existed except as a mythical reconstructed rear-view projection. For others, it is time to stop the slide of America into the steamy swamp of decaying morality and stinking sin. For a significant number of political leaders, it is time to look forward to America as the benevolent hegemonic superpower. Moreover, all of these visionaries see time as running out.

In America, syncretic religions and sectarian political movements breed like guppies. Within the contemporary political right are those that fear creeping corporatism, by which they mean the growth of the social welfare state, government regulations, and taxes. Further to the right, there is fear of government political repression and a New World Order, especially within the Christian Right, where many see it as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy signaling the apocalyptic End Times. Many on the political left share a fear of repression, but for them corporatism is chiefly the threat of globalized business conglomerates. Nevertheless, they also fear the potential for theocracy posed by the Christian Right. The terror attacks on September 11, 2001 – and the government's response to them – accelerated the energy of these movements.

At some point, sectarian political and social movements cross over a line into political religions.<sup>5</sup> Where do we draw the line? In the United States, this question is made more complicated by a history in which syncretic religions have repeatedly played a role in producing sectarian political and social movements. Unlike many European countries, there is neither a *de jure* nor a *de facto* central established religion in the United States, and no legacy of a divinely ordained monarchy. There is, however, a strong civil religion. Teasing out political religion will require some precision and careful terminology.

This chapter will look at political religion in the United States as a way to explore how movement leaders can construct political religion in any