

# Losing Their Religion

Neoconservatives lay claim to the Puritans

By Paul Gottfried

THERE IS A VIEW of the American past that a reader of any of the several neo-conservative house organs recognizes at once. One of my former graduate students and I quiz each other about how the editors of these journals might describe specific figures and events. Factual accuracy is irrelevant. What counts is how neoconservatives, given their selective memories and stereotypes, might interpret historical phenomena. One answers correctly by relating not what really happened but what the neo-conservatives present as a meaningful past. They do not allow disconfirming facts to alter this construction.

It was therefore not surprising when last month *Commentary* ran an essay, "Americanism and its Enemies," recapitulating familiar half-truths. The essay concerns the evolution of "Puritanism" as "Americanism" and identifies the exemplars and opponents of this American and predominantly Protestant civic religion. David Gelernter, the Yale professor of computer science who prepared this tribute, does not offer a shred of independent thought that might distinguish his argument about the progress and permutations of "the American religion" from the neoconservative party line. Gelernter quotes religious historians Perry Miller and Sidney Ahlstrom (my dissertation advisor) to lend support to his contentions, but he draws on sources in such a way that Miller and Ahlstrom would not always recognize their ideas or intentions. What is amply recognizable, on the other hand, are the ideological roots of Gelernter's take on American history.

A statement of at least part of the historical vision of neoconservatism is offered in Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*, in which "the American project" is defined as "the triumphant and majestic march of equality." Bloom writes, "When we Americans speak seriously about politics, we mean that our principles of freedom and equality and the rights based on them are everywhere applicable." Although Bloom, Charles Krauthammer, Ben Wattenberg, and Bill Kristol have favored a secular American crusade, other neoconservatives make periodic attempts to ground the effort in a distinctly religious outlook. Such an approach was evident when Michael Novak began preaching about "democracy as a divine mission." In a Christmas 1988 syndicated column, Novak compared global democracy to the Incarnation of Christ, explaining, "citizens of the world demand the birth of democracy in history, in physical institutions: as physical as the birth in Bethlehem."

But such comparisons reeked of blasphemy and Novak, a self-advertised Catholic theologian, eventually put them away. A more palatable neocon theology has been an appeal to Hebraic-sounding ideals to buttress an interventionist foreign policy. This tactic has well-noted precedents; Richard Gamble's *War for Righteousness*, which looks at the millenarian rhetoric accompanying Woodrow Wilson's holy war for democracy, is particularly instructive here. Gamble documents the long-established American cultural receptiveness to democratic crusading clothed in biblical passages

and postmillenarian images. In the early 20th century, idealistic Americans believed that it was their duty to perfect the world politically in preparation for Christ's return. In the neoconservative reformulation, this rhetoric assumes an Old Testament resonance and stresses how the ascribed religious heritage matches the beliefs of Jewish immigrants and their descendants.

From this perspective, an assumed Puritan pedigree for neoconservatives may be seen as inevitable. George Will in *Statecraft as Soulcraft* had already highlighted the Puritans as a progressive religious force trying to overcome human deficiencies: their "overreaching as moralists" was "the most admirable and most American of the American excesses." That problematic virtue, which Will finds in the Puritans, has been customarily associated with the neoconservatives. In an isolated, qualified criticism, John Ehrman in *The Rise of Neoconservatism* notices his subjects' "overzealousness." Neoconservatives "frequently viewed their enemies as embodiments of evil who must be destroyed rather than as opponents who must be debated with and persuaded."

In a series of historical essays, moreover, Gertrude Himmelfarb has since the '80s celebrated the identifiably Protestant virtues of hard work and honesty in early 19th-century England. In a 1989 article for *Commentary* entitled "Victorian Values, Jewish Values," Himmelfarb attributes the same virtues to Eastern European Jews who immigrated to England and the United States.

What is true are the following facts: English Puritans settled New England in the 17th century; John Winthrop, William Bradford, and other early Massachusetts leaders frequently compared themselves and their fellow Calvinists to the ancient Hebrews; and the Puritans bequeathed certain attitudes and a

Most significantly, Judaizing Christians created an “American religion,” which turns out to be Calvinism transformed into progressivism with a Hebraic cast. One problem that a historian might detect here is that for two millennia Jews have not been pure devotees of the Old Testament but products of Rabbinic

bearings from that crusty New Englander John Winthrop, who also had wanted, albeit in a different context, to build “a city on a hill.”

Like Winthrop and the Jews, all of these heroes relished those passages from Deuteronomy about “choosing life” for themselves and their progeny. And those who disapproved of Reagan were the “ones who hate America—for many of the same religion-mocking reasons that made them ridicule Woodrow Wilson.” Gelernter concludes in overdrive: those who hate us are guilty of “anti-Christianism and anti-Semitism” while being unalterably opposed to “a founder of this nation,” John Winthrop, who built the American religion with “his humanitarian decency along with his radical, God-fearing Americanism.”

Despite my own intellectual respect for the Puritans, I find it hard to recognize them or American Calvinism in Gelernter’s encomia. If he had done his homework, he would not be proclaiming the “humanitarian decency” and religious tolerance of his 17th-century subjects. (Tell it to the Quakers and Catholics!) And does it make sense to remember Oliver Cromwell, for whom New England Calvinists named their towns, as a “humanitarian”? The answer might depend on whether the respondent were a Sephardic Jew, resettled in a friendly English Commonwealth, or an Irish Catholic being hunted down by Cromwell’s Model Army. Equally questionable is whether one can reasonably attach a Puritan heritage to progressive and democratic forces—or activist presidents—centuries after self-described Puritans departed the scene.

One might never know from perusing Gelernter that the Puritans sold and kept slaves. His global democratic hero, Wilson, came from Calvinist Presbyterians who fought Lincoln; Wilson, when he was not “standing at the center of classical Americanism,” was imposing

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rhetorical style to later Americans. Equally true, the Puritans and other Calvinists treated the Jews better than had European Catholics, a situation that might have resulted from the strongly Old Testament-influenced Christianity that the Calvinists adopted. European Calvinists also had a reputation, not undeserved, for preferring republican to monarchical government.

It was easy for Jews of a certain generation, before the rise of multiculturalism, to identify with a Puritan America. If they had to live in a Christian society, that one was clearly of a kind that was least hostile to them. Harvard, Yale, and other Calvinist institutions once forced their students to learn Hebrew; Puritans and their descendants took Hebrew names; and the Massachusetts Bay Colony seriously considered making the ancient Jewish tongue its official language. In England, the Calvinist Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, brought Jews back to his commonwealth after an official absence of 350 years. Jews returned to England with full communal rights and religious freedom.

Gelernter dwells on the presumed moral and theological similarities between Jews and Calvinists. Although he has to concede that Puritans, unlike Jews, were Christians, he calls attention to their shared Old Testament notions of justice and divine retribution for sin.

law and Talmudic guidance. How they understand the Old Testament has come through this continuing filter, just as the Calvinist understanding of the same document reflects the teachings of the New Testament, particularly the Pauline epistles. It is hard to associate Talmudic legalists with John Winthrop and Cotton Mather, neither of whom was a Rabbinic Jew; they were Christians who borrowed images from the Hebrew Scriptures and found parallels between their group and the ancient Hebrews. While Calvinists were admirably free from anti-Semitism and developed a Christian theology that relied on the Old Testament, they were not Jewish surrogates building a “religion of Americanism.”

Even more dubious is the attempt to link Puritanism to those political heroes in the American past whom Gelernter finds personally agreeable. Thus we are shown Abraham Lincoln, the son of hard-shell Baptists, invoking the divine will in his struggle against slavery; Woodrow Wilson, the grandson of a Presbyterian minister, fighting a war to make the world safe for democracy; and Harry Truman waging a new crusade for democracy while reading the Bible repeatedly from beginning to end. The same Calvinist grace is then fast-forwarded to the latter-day global democrats Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. Both apparently took their moral

racial segregation on civil-service jobs or embroiling his country in foreign wars. America's largest Calvinist concentrations in the 19th century were in the antebellum South, and the South's most esteemed Calvinist theologians, Robert Lewis Dabney and J.H. Thornwell, supported slavery with enthusiasm.

It is startling that an educated adult would believe that a lack of fondness for Wilson and other activist presidents points to anti-Semitic and/or anti-American baggage. As the descendant of Jews who were on the losing side of the First World War, I was raised to hate Wilson as an enemy of the Habsburg Empire. And it is certainly possible to despise Wilson's oratory—which John Lukacs refers to as “warmed-over oatmeal”—without disliking the Old Testament.

Gelernter's depiction of good guys and bad guys and the attitudes he attaches to both are readily contestable. Samuel Johnson is brought up negatively, as an “anti-American” and Anglican monarchist who disliked the colonial revolutionaries. But Johnson mocked the revolutionaries as “slave-drivers” whose “yelping about liberty” exuded hypocrisy. Unlike Lincoln, whom Gelernter presents as a biblically inspired opponent of slavery, Johnson devoted himself to abolition and the betterment of blacks throughout his adult life. In England, anti-slavery crusaders, who by the 1830s had succeeded in ending slavery in the British Empire, were often Anglican High Tories. (Gelernter tries to deal with such inconvenient facts by indicating that “Puritans” could be found in non-Puritan confessions as well.) And there are historians who have criticized Lincoln's war policy but never, to my knowledge, Christianity or its Hebraic antecedents. One such historian, Forrest McDonald, has lambasted Lincoln with the help of his wife, who happens to be Jewish.

A possible subtext for Gelernter's fantasies, and those of his neoconservative sponsors, is a Conservative Jewish prayer book that came out in 1946 and that Gelernter likely noticed at religious services, as I did. This prayer book, still widely in use, features English responsive readings that call to mind “Americanism as religion.” These highly political readings extol the Puritans—who supposedly carried religious liberty to the New World—Washington's defense of tolerance, and Emma Lazarus's huddled masses, before saying nice things about FDR's “Four Freedoms” and the New Deal. Although a simplistic view, it is a compelling one for someone inclined

to believe it. It helps to build a bridge between one's minority status and progressive politics and one's adopted country. It also provides neoconservative missions with a religious and historical justification—or at least the appearance of one. But in the process Cleo is pressed into the service of ideology, and Puritanism is reduced to caricature. As Hegel was rumored to say when details contradicted his historical philosophy: “That is all the worse for the facts!” ■

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## Left Behind

Kids have too little to respect.

**By Marian Kester Coombs**

AS ANNA SINGS in “The King and I,” “It's a very ancient saying, but a true and honest thought/That if you become a teacher, by your pupils you'll be taught.” In my case—teaching in the middle and high schools of an East Coast suburban district—I learn not only about the pupils, their parents, the system, and society, but also about the globalizing processes that have produced these children, these canaries in the mineshaft of Western civilization.

The balance of power and the dominant institutional culture within the public schools have changed profoundly. No more subordinated hierarchy of youths competing to be patted on the head by adult authority figures. Power is now in the hands of the inmates, and their preoccupation is with respect—and, of course, its opposite, “dissing.” An obsession imported from

the mean streets, this demand, backed up by physical force and psychological intimidation, stands in stark contrast to the almost complete lack of deference shown to authorities.

The new school culture thus throbs with barely constrained chaos. Teachers who lack the will or stamina to be on constant guard against the student stewpot boiling over are abandoning the profession in droves. But however great the pressure on teachers and administrators to make a show of (unearned) respect to kids, far greater is the pressure on kids themselves. The ghetto/barrio practice of “playing the dozens”—defined by the *Urban Dictionary* as “a pursuit, native to Southside black youths, the prime practitioners thereof, in which each attempts to outwit the other by deriding him with a greater and more prodigious succession of epithets”—is firmly entrenched in all