

With God on Our Side

(*Good Times*, Santa Cruz, March 4, 2004)

Ronnie D. Lipschutz

In announcing his support for a constitutional amendment barring same-sex marriages, President Bush implied, if he did not directly state, that he was strongly driven by religious concerns. No surprises there: since the Presidential campaign of 2000, religious themes have been present in innumerable pronouncements by Administration officials, and so-called religious conservatives have made it a litmus test for their support for him. God is omnipresent. As Bush said about the Middle East in his most recent State of the Union Address, "I believe that God has planted in every human heart the desire to live in freedom." And, he continued, "America is a nation with a mission, and that mission comes from our most basic beliefs." Presumably, these are religious ones.

The President's statements might simply be excused as political rhetoric, but there is more to it than that. Religion is foundational to American politics and foreign policy, and has been for more than 200 years. Indeed, every 50 or 75 years, the United States experiences what amounts to a national religious revival, with impacts on culture, economics, politics and foreign policy.

These "Great Awakenings," as they are called, first happened in the middle of the 18th century. They are characterized by mass returns to religious practices, accompanied by waves of xenophobia and political conflict, on the one hand, and by all kinds of innovation in religious and social practices, on the other. Such revivals also seem to coincide with periods of major industrial change as well as territorial expansion and military adventurism. Which is cause and which is effect is less than clear.

The Second Great Awakening extended from roughly 1830 to 1850. It came at a time when the Industrial Revolution was beginning to displace the largely agricultural basis of the American Republic in the Northeast. New immigrants from Ireland and other parts of Europe were settling in the cities (recall *The Gangs of New York*), and major territorial acquisitions and conquests were made in the West (Texas, California, parts of Mexico).

The Third Great Awakening began during the 1880s and lasted until World War One. It developed as manufacturing began to outpace rural production, throwing millions off the land, the economy underwent a succession of depressions, and corporate cartels, such as Standard Oil, became the norm. This time, large numbers of immigrants were arriving from Southern and Eastern Europe (many of

the Jews), while colonial and economic expansion into Latin America, the Pacific and Asia began in earnest.

The Fourth Great Awakening appears to have started around 1980, with the election of Ronald Reagan. During that decade, the world went through a major recession, the Steel Belt began to rust and the American industrial system began its trek offshore. Large numbers of immigrants arrived from Latin America, Asia and other distant parts of the world. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the constraints on U.S. economic and military expansion disappeared, reaching its apotheosis (so far) in the invasion of Iraq.

These Great Awakenings seem to be accompanied by what have been called "culture wars." These develop as industrial and economic transitions trigger instabilities in status hierarchies and social order. Practices and behaviors that, at one time, were forbidden, gradually come to be more widely accepted (such as same-sex marriage), and new forms and patterns of livelihood and economic organization make some wealthy and others poorer (the Information Revolution).

Those who believe they are the guardians or mainstays of "traditional values" come to believe that the collapse of civilization is imminent. They search for targets to blame for the disorder and disrespect they think are symptoms of the coming calamity. Foreigners, gays, adolescents and progressives are easy targets, among others, for they tend to stray from the verities of the past. The division of society into those who are "good" and those who are not follows rather easily.

Still, the traditionalists are fighting a losing battle. They live in a society with an endlessly innovative culture, driven by capitalism's continual search for new things to turn into items that can be sold for profit. Some people take on new lifestyles as a form of resistance to tradition, but these are easily co-opted by entrepreneurs who sell them as the latest thing. Eventually, opposition becomes mainstream (think, for example, of hip-hop), and new forms of resistance emerge.

In the meantime, however, the war rages on, both at home and abroad. The most recent shots, fired from San Francisco, are an example of how religious belief gets incorporated into practices that offend religious believers. The repeated efforts to portray Islam as condoning violence and terrorism shows how enemies are identified to explain resistance to American activities abroad. And the continuous red-baiting of liberals and the left by neo-conservative radio commentators and politicians illustrate the need to account for the apparent up-ending of the "proper" social order at home.

Miracles and the Market
(*Good Times*, March 18, 2004)

Ronnie D. Lipschutz

Last November, I clipped a short letter from *The New York Times*. The author, one Robert K. Elliott of Hastings-on Hudson, N.Y., wrote to the editor that “America has two great historical (and historic) projects: to secure the blessings of liberty to our own people and to export liberty to the rest of the world: America the nation and America the ideal.”

I was somewhat nonplussed by his claim. Who assigned such world historical projects to America [sic; surely he did not include Canada]? How could the letter writer be sure that History has assigned these projects to us? Does success mean that we were chosen to do this? And why did he use the term “export,” rather than “extend” or “offer?”

As I pondered these questions, I began to think about the Bush Administration’s plans to disseminate democracy and markets to the Middle East, beginning with Iraq. There is no reason to think that these cannot develop in that part of the world, but on what basis does the United States take on such a monumental task? We are in no position to dictate proper behavior to others, and it does not appear, so far, that force can do the trick.

The more I thought about this paradox, the more it seemed that religious belief was at their foundation. To be sure, there was nothing in the letter to indicate that Mr. Elliott is a religious man, and there is no reason that he need be. Nonetheless, his claim echoes a long-standing notion that the United States stands as a “light unto the nations.” Surely, if we have been so successful for so long (more than 200 years!), we must be an example to the rest of the benighted world.

This idea originated with the Puritans who immigrated to North America in the 17th century, and it has informed our relations with the world since then. A century ago, the United States sent missionaries abroad to spread the Gospel. Today, we send businesspeople abroad to spread the Market. Whereas “liberty” once connoted freedom from despotic rulers and arbitrary actions, today liberty means choice in the market, unhindered by tariffs, regulations or other non-economic restrictions. Salvation can be achieved through the “freedom to choose,” as Milton Friedman once put it.

There is, of course, a connection between religion and politics, one articulated by Max Weber at the beginning of the 20th century in his essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber was intrigued by his observation that Protestant societies, by and large, were more economically dynamic and expansive than Catholic ones. He

attributed this difference to the Calvinist belief in predestination: one’s salvation had been decided by God when the world was created, and there was nothing that could be done to change that decision.

But, the idea that one was either bound for Heaven and Hell was too onerous, and eventually worldly success and benevolence came to be seen as indicative of salvation and a good end in itself. In the United States, according to Weber, even this latter concept had gone by the wayside. Pointing to the pithy sayings of Benjamin Franklin, Weber noted that a simpler worship of economic accomplishment and a commitment to the hard work needed to reach that goal has become the national religion. Liberty was up to the *individual*.

The result, according to this last line of thought, was a virtuous, stable society, in which each individual bore responsibility for his or her well-being, and in which people were too busy pursuing success to engage in activities that might undermine class and hierarchy. No riots, no revolutions, no politics.

But it did work, didn’t it? The United States not only became the richest and most powerful society in the world, it was able to spread the blessings of its prosperity far and wide. Those who refused to recognize the virtues of economic liberty would be instructed and converted, with force, if necessary (Lord knows, there have been many cases of the latter).

Nor does it injure our more mundane economic interests that such transformations are to our benefit. If we can turn Iraq into a model democracy with an open capitalist economy, the people and governments of neighboring countries will have to recognize both our Historic project and the salvation it will bring to them. And we will have done good by doing well.

Anyway, it’s a nice story.

Proselytism and Power

(*Good Times*, Santa Cruz, April 1, 2004)

Ronnie D. Lipschutz

In his Farewell Address upon retiring from office, George Washington warned the country to “steer clear of permanent alliances, with any portion of the foreign world.” While this often has been understood to mean that the United States should maintain a high degree of insularity in foreign affairs, what Washington was most concerned about was remaining aloof from the power politics of Europe. Fearful of falling under the control of one or another European power, it seemed prudent for the United States not to put itself in a position in which it might become vulnerable.

Washington did not, however, mean to argue that the United States had no role in the world’s future; to him, as to most others, the country was a pacific republic that stood for a “New Order of the Ages” (*Novus Ordo Seclorum*; check your dollar bills). In his view, it was the power of example, and not the sword, that would transform the world. And, in this, he was offering what had been much the conventional wisdom since the first colonies were established along the Atlantic Coast. That view has not changed dramatically in the intervening 200 years.

In my last two columns, I suggested that much of the United States’ current activity abroad could be explained, if not entirely rationalized, as part of a semi-religious effort to convert the rest of the world to American-style democracy and markets. But, whereas the United States of 1801 had little more than faith on which to base this project, during the 19th century, the country became a world power. That power was put into the service of extending their economic and political influence, first into northern Mexico and the West Coast, then the Pacific Ocean and Asia and, finally, other parts of the world.

Today, that power is represented by the U.S. military. Annual defense expenditures by the United States are now approximately equal to the total of those spent on the next 20 largest militaries in the world. While this does not mean that we are getting comparable bang for the buck—we might be getting more or less—it does suggest how great is the power in the hands of American policymakers. What is not at all clear, however, is its purpose.

In the study published by the Project for the New American Century in September 2000, the authors—a number of whom later became President Bush’s planners and strategists—envisioned using the U.S. military to maintain “a global security order that is uniquely friendly to American principles and prosperity.” While this might seem no more than an intention to protect the country’s national interests, it is much more extensive in its ambitions.

The United States, it is often said, has never been an imperialist power, intent on occupying other nations. Perhaps that is true, but it has never hesitated to use its power in the service of converting others. The logic seems impeccable: if They are like Us, then They will not resent or hate Us. And if They seem not to want to be like us, they are wrong and must be shown the error of their ways.

Unfortunately, the process of conversion is never as simple as it seems to those who have not had to go through it. Most of us, after all, were born or immigrated into this society, and its beliefs and practices do not seem that alien. Nor do we blame these beliefs and practices for undermining or destroying our traditions. This is not the case in other parts of the world.

There, our methods and intentions are often regarded not as positive or benign but quite the opposite. Even if most people are eager to experience prosperity and partake of American goods and culture, they may find the transition an altogether unpleasant and even deadly one. That some resist with violence should come as no surprise.

It is at this point that power melds with proselytism. One of our objectives in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan is to convert doubting Thomases, or to eliminate them if they refuse to follow. As we have seen in those three countries, it does not take many active opponents to raise doubts about the entire project.

It is entirely reasonable to argue that, if only those who were enemies of peace could be imprisoned or killed, the people in those countries would be much more favorable toward the United States. But the kind of power that we can bring to bear on these unbelievers is not likely to turn them into democrats or capitalists. At the same time, the death of one individual might well create another 10 or 100 or 1,000 opponents (as seems likely to result, for example, from Israel’s recent assassination of Hamas’s Sheikh Yassin).

We earnestly desire that others believe, as President Bush put it in the *National Security Strategy* of 2002, that “we do not use our strength to press for unilateral advantage.” We might still think we set an example for others; unfortunately, the example seen by others might not be the one we have in mind.

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