

Religious Roots of American Foreign Policy: The Origin of the Consciousness of the “Mission of America”

Koichi Mori*

Abstract

This article seeks to find the origin of the “mission of America”, which lies at the root of the nation’s global strategy, in a feature of Puritanism and its eschatology. At the same time, this article considers elements found in America’s global strategy that hinder co-existence and how to overcome them. Global strategy pursued by the Bush administration after 9/11, to the point of arrogance, was not based just on practical diplomatic decisions to pursue national interests. What lay behind these decisions were America’s sense of mission, an awareness that is ideological as well as religious. If we look at the state of religion in America today, it is hard to see prominent acts of criticism against the global strategy of the current administration from transcendental, self-critical American awareness. However, this consciousness has not disappeared from the American religious tradition. What is needed is an awareness once again that another religious tradition exists, and to assist this tradition from a position of empathy.

Keywords: Mission of America, US Global strategy, Puritanism.

* Professor Emeritus, Doshisha University

Introduction

I. America's Global Strategy and the Universal Ideal

The main reasons for the September 11 attacks, and after the Iraq War, the main reasons for the harsh criticism directed towards the U.S. from the Islamic world are: (1) the arrogance underlying the “mission of America,” in which the nation seeks to force the Islamic world to accept values and ideals that it considers universal, even by force; and (2) the unilateral support of Israel in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Both of these stances have deep connections with Christianity and the “civil religion” of America (Mori, 1996).

At the CISMOR International Workshop “Islam and the West: Examining the Diplomatic Thought of the United States,” held in October 2007, the political philosopher Francis Fukuyama criticized the unilateralism of the neoconservatives and the administration of then President George W Bush. However, at the same time, he asserted the universal validity of liberal democracy. Against this claim, the Islamic scholar and president of Bagher Al-Ulum University Ahmad Vaezi Jazei replied sharply: “I support democracy. But America’s liberal democracy is a type of ideology”

It was an unforgettable exchange. Vaezi Jazei saw that liberal democracy is a product of the modern age, and a feature of the modern age is “secularization (anti-religion).” Democracy for the religion-revering Islamic world should be a democracy different from liberal democracy, which presumes the separation of church and state.

The separation of church and state is one of the defining



characteristics of liberal democracy. In America, however, religion is a major influence in not only the private sphere, but also in its public sphere, including diplomacy. This is shown by the extremely religious response of the American public immediately after 9/11, and by then President George W Bush's speeches, which frequently employed religious discourse. America is an exceptional "religious nation." For the U.S., which seeks to expand freedom and democracy in the world, its global strategy and religion (Christianity and the "civil religion") do not stand opposed to each other. Rather, the U.S.' global strategy is justified by religion.

In 1995, 20 years after the end of the Vietnam War, Robert McNamara, the U.S. Secretary of Defense during the war, published his memoirs, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. In it, he details 11 main reasons for the failure of the U.S. in the war. Of these reasons, the following should be heeded by America today:

- Our misjudgments of friend and foe, alike, reflected our profound ignorance of the history, culture, and politics of the people in the area, and the personalities and habits of their leaders.

- We failed then—as we have since—to recognize the limitations of modern, high-technology military equipment, forces, and doctrine in confronting unconventional, highly motivated people's movements. We failed as well to adapt our military tactics to the task of winning the hearts and minds of people from a totally different culture.

- We did not recognize that neither our people nor our leaders are omniscient. ... We do not have the God-given right to shape every nation in our image or as we choose (McNamara, 1996; 322-323).

These reasons can be said to be sharp criticism of George W Bush and the neoconservatives' "globalism of ideas," which sees the American ideology of freedom and democracy as a universal ideology and seeks to expand it in the Middle East and the rest of the world to make America safe. Other pages in McNamara's memoirs, however,



contain statements at odds with the reflections above:

We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values. ... I truly believe that we made an error not of values and intentions but of judgments and capabilities. (McNamara, 1996; 322-323)

These statements by McNamara can be summarized as follows: The cause of the Vietnam War was not wrong. It was based on the founding principles, traditions, and values of America. If errors were committed, they were errors of “judgments and capabilities.” In other words, errors were in strategies and in the implementation of these strategies.

The same reasoning applies to George Bush and his judgment on Iraqi war that the cause of the Iraq War was not wrong, that where mistakes took place were in strategies to realize this cause, then the U.S. is certain to repeat a second or third Vietnam War or Iraq War. What the U.S. needs is a reflection on the “mission of America.”

As seen in McNamara’s memoirs, a characteristic of American diplomacy is the major influence of values and ideology in determining diplomatic strategy. This characteristic is not limited to diplomacy. American domestic affairs is embroiled in a “culture war,” and during every election year, issues that revolve around questions of values, such as abortion and the legalization of homosexual marriage, become major points of contention. Why is it that issues involving values have such a great effect on the public sphere - including diplomacy and domestic affairs – in America? The answer is philosophical and religious. It is because human beings search for meaning. Because America cannot place its “common past,” such as ethnic and cultural traditions, in a united national foundation, it cannot help but place the meaning of its existence as a nation—its national identity—in ideology and in values hoped for to realize the nation—its “common future” (Mori, 1996: 55-58)



II. Similarities between American Diplomacy and Foreign Mission of Christianity

In her essay “Foreign Mission and Americanization of the World,” Rui Kohiyama analyzes the similarities between American diplomacy and foreign mission (Kohiyama, 1997: 123-124). The period of active foreign mission by Americans at the end of the 19th century matched the period of active American diplomacy that came as a result of the abolishment of the Monroe doctrine, a closed-door policy that had limited American diplomacy to the American continents.

The Spanish–American War, ostensibly launched by the U.S. to aid the independence of Cuba, a colony of Spain, exceeded the bounds of American diplomacy defined by the Monroe Doctrine, and expanded to the Philippines, another colony of Spain.

Reflecting on the war, then President William McKinley described the moment of his decision in the following way:

I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I ... prayed to Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night. And one night late it came to me this way ... that there was nothing left for us to do but to take [the Philippines] all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them ... And then I went to bed and went to sleep and slept soundly. (Mori, 1996: 30-31)⁷ (Emphasis added.)

If we substitute “Iraq” for “the Philippines,” we see a similarity in the American cause of the Iraq War. To educate, uplift, and civilize Iraq, the U.S. would govern the country, oppressed under Saddam Hussein’s totalitarian regime. This is the great cause of the Iraq War. Of course, the expression “Christianize” is not used today. However, immediately after 9/11, in his speech President Bush stated that the attacks were perpetrated by “barbarians” against “civilization.” The Islamic world should be civilized. To America, this is the cause of the Iraq War. The content of “civilizing” shared in the cause of the Spanish-American War and the Iraq War is none other than the



realization of republican principles, which is represented by “freedom and democracy.” In other words, for America, “to civilize” is to “Americanize.” To express this in universalistic terms, it is “globalization” of the world with “American values” asserted by America.

Rui Kohiyama introduces the idea “reflex influence” as a means by which American missionaries recognized the legitimacy of their cause (Kohiyama, 1997:103).⁸ “Reflex influence” was a loop by which witness of success in foreign mission led to recognition of the legitimacy of foreign mission, recognition of the legitimacy of one’s own faith, and further heightening of faith. If we look at diplomacy led by American ideology, we can see the “reflex influence” found in foreign mission at work in creating a similar recognition loop. In other words, when America asserts its values overseas, seeing its values take place creates a loop by which the nation recognizes as legitimate those values and the diplomatic policies to expand these values. The success of democratization in Germany and Japan after World War II can be said to be the best examples. The defeat in the Vietnam and the quagmire in Iraq, then, should lead to a negative “reflex influence,” whereby the failure of American values to be realized overseas creates doubts about the legitimacy of these values. One is reminded of the great shock delivered to America by the defeat in Vietnam. What about the Iraq War?

- Immediately after 9/11, President Bush used religious concepts and language to describe the cause for continuing the “war against terror” in Iraq. Below are extracts from two representative speeches:

- Americans are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world; it is God’s gift to humanity. (From George W. Bush’s Third State of the Union Address, Jan. 28, 2003).

- The attack on our nation was also an attack on the ideals that



make us a nation. Our deepest national conviction is that every life is precious, because every life is the gift of a Creator who intended us to live in liberty and equality. ...

● [We] do know that God has placed us together in this moment, to grieve together, to stand together, to serve each other and our country. ... And our prayer tonight is that God will see us through, and keep us worthy. ... Our country is strong. And our cause is even larger than our country. Ours is the cause of human dignity: freedom guided by conscience, and guarded by peace. This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind. That hope drew millions to this harbor. That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it. (From speech on the first anniversary of 9/11, Ellis Island in New York)

The purposes of the “war against terror” and the Iraq War are the same, just as the causes of all of America’s wars in the 20th century since the abolishment of the Monroe Doctrine. This unwavering uniformity is astonishing. The cause is to fight against totalitarianism, and to grant freedom and democracy to peoples oppressed by totalitarianism. The Spanish-American War was fought against the totalitarianism of the king of Spain; the First World War against the totalitarianism of the emperor of Germany; the Second World War against the totalitarianism of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and the imperial state of Japan; the Korean War and the Vietnam War against the totalitarianism of communism; and the Gulf War and the Iraq War against the totalitarianism of Saddam Hussein.

III. The Declaration of Independence and Its Religious Expression

The purpose of war by the U.S. expressed in the two speeches of President Bush above is to realize fundamental human rights such as freedom, equality and democracy: the core principles of the Enlightenment. What should be underlined in those two speeches (freedom is “God’s gift to humanity”, and “Our deepest national conviction is that every life is precious, because every life is the gift of



a Creator who intended us to live in liberty and equality”) is that America’s cause of fundamental human rights is expressed using religious concepts and language.

Such expressions are consistent with the traditions of America since its founding by the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration announced the meaning of the nation’s founding to its people and the world. As stated above, because America could not unite itself with a “common past” of history, tradition, and ethnicity, it sought to unite itself with a “common future,” ideas and ideals that should be realized by the founding cause of the nation.

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. (From The Declaration of Independence)

The cause of America’s founding was to realize the fundamental human rights of “all men” (but just “all American citizens”). But why was this cause expressed in religious language? During the period of independence, almost all Americans accepted the “God of the Bible”, so using biblical language to express the purpose of America’s founding was more natural and appropriate. This is still the case today. When President Bush used biblical language to state that “freedom and democracy,” the core concepts of the Enlightenment, were the cause of the “war against terror”, this was because about 90 percent of the American people accept the “God of the Bible” (Mori: 11-12).

At this point, however, a question arises. America was not the only nation that sought to realize the central tenets of the Enlightenment, fundamental human rights (freedom, equality, and the pursuit of happiness), as its founding cause. So did France. But when we consider the relationship between this purpose and the theme of this article, the “mission of America,” we see that while France holds to the same Enlightenment principles as the founding causes of the republic, its consciousness of a “mission of France” is faint. Of



course, it holds firmly to convictions concerning the realization of Enlightenment principles in its domestic affairs, and shows deep concern for global human rights. But when it comes to diplomacy, at least, it is hard to discern consciousness of a “mission of France”, unlike America, which uses even military force to realize its mission. In other words, there must be another factor besides Enlightenment principles that inform the consciousness of the American mission.

IV. The Roots of American Mission

There are two “Fathers” in American history: the “Pilgrim Fathers” and the “Founding Fathers.” Their thoughts make up the source of the American spirit received by later generations of Americans. The Pilgrim Fathers were Pilgrims who came to America in 1620 aboard the Mayflower. The Founding Fathers were leaders of the American Revolution who signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776. The thoughts of the Pilgrim Fathers were based on the Bible and Christianity; the thoughts of the Founding Fathers on the Enlightenment. The Declaration of Independence proclaimed the cause of America’s founding, built on Enlightenment principles. That it expressed this cause in biblical terms indicates not an opposition of the Enlightenment to Christianity, but rather, their coexistence.

Who were the Puritans? They were Protestants who joined the Reformation in England. The Protestant Reformation in England must be understood from two approaches. The first is “Reformation from above.” This was a reformation initiated by the king, grounded on the anti-Vatican sentiments of the people, and resulted in the establishment of the Church of England. The second is “Reformation from below,” and those who sought to realize it were the Puritans. The name “Puritan” comes from “pure” or “purify.” They believed that the Reformation by the Church of England still left conspicuous elements of Catholicism in place, and was not sufficiently thoroughgoing. They sought to realize a Protestant church with a spirit of purer reformation; hence their name, the “Puritans.”



A feature of Puritanism was that faith was not simply an interior matter for individuals. The Puritans also sought to create society and nation based on faith, as exemplified by the “Puritan Revolution” in England. Through revolution, they sought to realize their notion of the nation as something righteous before God. A few decades before the Puritan Revolution, some Puritans, believing that it was impossible to build a nation based on the faith of Puritanism in England, sought to create such a nation overseas. Beginning with the Pilgrim Fathers, they migrated to America.

Many believe that the Puritans migrated to America to flee religious persecution in England and to pursue “separation of church and state.” This view, however, is not correct. To be sure, they were subjected to religious oppression, but they migrated to America not to seek “separation of church and state,” but to create society (nation) based on Puritanism as the state religion, which they were not able to do in England. It should be remembered that in the New England Puritan society, there was frequent oppression of those who criticized the Puritan state religion.

In England, the Puritans were agitated toward revolution and set out across the Atlantic Ocean to create a society in America (the Holy Commonwealth) based on the Bible. They did this because of a feature of Puritan theology: their sense of the imminence of the Final Judgment. They believed they were living in the end of history and that the Second Coming of Christ, which would bring about judgment of the world and the kingdom of God, was at hand. They sought to realize a righteous and pure church and society (nation) that would bear the judgment of Christ. This eschatological consciousness is responsible for the Puritan Revolution and the creation of Puritan society in New England (Iwai, 1995).

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked



and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. (The Book of the Revelation of John 20:1ff)

The passage above in the New Testament (from the Revelation of John), depicting the “cosmic drama” of the end of history, prophesizes that when Christ returns to judge the world and establish the kingdom of God, Satan, the source of all evil, would be bound in chains, and a period of a thousand years during which he cannot act would arrive. The ancients, who lived during the Biblical era, believed that all misfortune, including suffering and diseases, was the work of the devil or evil spirits. They believed in the millennium, a thousand year period of bliss, during which Satan, the leader of the evil spirits, cannot act.

Later generations of the church believed the millennium to be an important element of the Christian understanding of history, and awaited its arrival. However, in neither Revelation nor other books does the Bible reveal the chronological relationship between the arrival of the millennium and the Second Coming of Christ. Thus two schools of millennialism appeared in the history of Christianity. “Pre-millennialism” argued that before the arrival of the millennium, Christ will come again and judge the world, after which he himself would institute the millennium, bringing the kingdom of God to earth. “Post-millennialism” argued that the millennium would first be realized through the church and Christian political power, after which Christ would come again.

The leaders of the Puritan Revolution in England and the Puritans who sought to establish a biblical nation in New England all believed in pre-millennialism. Christ would soon come again to judge the world. Hence, everything would be judged, including the system of government and church, and what had to be done was to prepare for Christ’s Second Coming; i.e. form the right church and the right nation. There was no other objective. Because everything in the world would be judged by Christ at his Second Coming, the stance of the



Puritans toward this world was extremely pessimistic and passive.

By contrast, post-millennialists believed that the Second Coming of Christ and the arrival of the kingdom of God can be realized sooner by bringing about the millennium as quickly as possible through one's own effort (including the efforts of the church and nation). In other words, the stance toward the present world is optimistic and active. In the history of American Puritanism, there occurred a shift from the pre-millennialism of the first generation to the post-millennialism of the second and later generations. The central figure in this transition was Jonathan Edwards.

Jonathan Edwards was a leading theologian involved in the "First Great Awakening" in New England just before the American Revolution. Using the "international Atlantic network" of Protestant leaders in England and Europe, he sought to confirm that the religious revivals occurring in New England were also occurring in all of Europe. That is, he sought to confirm the inter-Atlantic religious revivals as a sign of the coming of the millennium (Saito: 78-80).

One point that should be noted in Edward's eschatology is his belief in America as the central location for the arrival of the millennium. In other words, he believed that America had been given a special mission in salvation's history by God.

V. The American Revolution and Millennialism

In his article "The American Revolution and Religion," Makoto Saito argues that the Bible and millennialism played a critical role in the success of the American Revolution (Saito: 63-94). As proof, Saito presents *Common Sense* (1776) by Thomas Paine, a leader of the Revolution, and the Quebec Act of 1774.

Paine's *Common Sense* was a bestseller of its time, selling more than 300,000 copies in New England, which then had a population of 2.5 million. In an era of meager advertising, distribution, and publishing, it was read by more than one-tenth of the populace, and is believed to have contributed critically to the success of the American



Revolution.

For New England to claim independence from England and form the United States of America, its people needed a shift in identity from “English” to “American.” In the early period of the American Revolution, New Englanders rallied around the cry “No taxation without representation,” and created an anti-tax movement when the stamp tax and tea tax were imposed on them by England, which had no such taxes. This demonstrates that at that time, they clearly understood their identity as English. Why else would they revolt against taxes that were not imposed on their fellow countrymen? For the Revolution to succeed, a shift to the view of England as enemy and to American identity was needed. Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* contributed significantly to this shift.

Paine used biblical concepts and language to argue that hereditary rule in England was anti-biblical. What we should remember is that Paine originally showed a strong anti-Christian tendency, and before writing *Common Sense*, he made a series of anti-Christian remarks. So why did he change his stance in *Common Sense* and sought to justify the Revolution using a biblical framework? It was because, immediately before the Revolution, Paine saw the religious revival of the First Great Awakening. If Paine did not use the language of the Bible or Christianity, but instead used the concepts and language of the Enlightenment to argue for the legitimacy of the Revolution, it is doubtful that *Common Sense* would have become such a bestseller. It would not have spurred the populace toward revolution.

To shed light on the relationship between the success of the American Revolution and millennialism, Saito next introduces the Quebec Act of 1774, enacted by England to strengthen colonial rule over New England. To win independence from England and form the United States, New England had to first emerge victorious from the conflicts with the colonies of other European powers. New England lay next to the region colonized by France (New France),



and wrestled with New France for control of the New World. These colonial conflicts were decisively settled by New England's victory in the French and Indian War in 1763. As a result of defeating the combined forces of France and the native tribes in the Great Lakes region, England took the area of New France under its control.

Even when fighting against New France, New England justified the meaning of the conflict in a millennialist framework. For Puritans, Catholics, who bowed their heads to the pope, had a demonic (Satanic) existence in opposition to true Christianity. The fight against Catholic France was a fight against the Antichrist of the end of history. The defeat of New France was a victory for New England as much as it was a victory for England. At this point, the people of New England could not have understood their identity as anything other than English.

However, after the end of the French and Indian War, England enacted a series of laws that were hard for New England to fathom. First, to end colonial conflicts in the New World, England strengthened mercantilist policies towards New England, and imposed taxes that did not exist in the home country. These included the aforementioned stamp tax and the tea tax. New England responded with boycotts. These incidents would ignite the American Revolution.

After victory in the French and the Indian War, New England expected that the territories formerly belonging to New France would now belong to it. However, England not only took direct control of these areas, but also implemented a policy of religious tolerance. That is, it accepted the Catholic Church as the state church in the area of the former New France. In England, the era of the Puritan Revolution of the 1640s had passed, and ushered in the era of the Glorious Revolution and the English Restoration. It was an era of co-existence between different Protestant denominations through religious tolerance, instead of national unification by a specific faith. So, to smoothly manage the English colonies across the Atlantic in



America, England approved Catholicism as the state religion of the former New France.

For the Founding Fathers, the leaders of the American Revolution, the mercantilist policies of England were probably a direct cause of the revolution for independence. But to explain the Revolution to and persuade the people of New England, those who actually carried out boycotts and bore arms to fight in the Revolutionary War, arguing for the revolution against England using a millennialist framework was undoubtedly more effectively. The people of New England believed that the colonial wars against New France were a fight in the end of history against the Antichrist. And so was the fight against England, which recognized Catholicism as the state religion of the former New France. The war against England was thus justified as a fight with eschatological significance. Makoto Saito observes the significance of the millennialism in the American Revolution as a “secularized millennialism.” (Saito :78-80) The millennialism here belonged to the post-millennialism described above, and it was entwined with the sense of the “American mission,” the special role borne by America, to realize the millennium.

Conclusion

If we consider the historical development of the United States after the Revolution, it is true that the urgent sense of the end of history felt in the Puritan colonies of New England and during the American Revolution has gradually disappeared. However, a dualistic understanding of the world as aligned either to Christ or to the Antichrist (Satan), a characteristic of millennialism and biblical eschatological consciousness, as well as a sense of mission as the elect, remain to this day.

As is frequently observed, millennialism as described above plays an important role in shaping the worldview and historical understanding of fundamentalist Christians called the Religious Right and Christian Zionists concerning the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. But



what this author would like to point out is that millennialism not only informs minority and particular groups like Christian fundamentalists and Christian Zionists, but that a secular millennialism unconsciously exists in the background of the “American mission” supported by many ordinary Americans who form the middle-of-the-road consensus of the nation.

At the start of the Iraq War, more than 70 percent of Americans supported the war. As of December 2008, this figure dropped to less than 30 percent. Does this decline also in fact reflect a decline in the American consensus for the support of the “American mission” to bring “freedom and democracy”? This author really does not think so. In the last presidential election year (2008), no candidates were seen criticizing “freedom and democracy” and the “mission of America.” Instead, they further emphasized them. This leads to the question of whether that position was taken in response to public opinion.

The arrogance in the American global strategy, based on its sense of mission and as the elect, has drawn harsh criticism from various quarters from around the world. Japan is no exception. However, the criticisms against America have been more emotional than rational or practical. If a sense of practicalism concerning the following questions, “What is the purpose of the criticism?” “Is the purpose feasible?” and “To whom specifically is the criticism addressed?” is not present, there is the possibility that the criticism will become resentment or a howl.

Unfortunately, the only one that can change America, the superpower, is America. What can we do for the United States to change? We have to criticize America strategically.

America has a greater resilience than Japan. The source of this resilience is its self-criticism. It exists in America’s history and tradition. America’s eschatological understanding and millennial self-understanding do not constitute a “single track” in its religious traditions. It is a fact that a millennialist understanding of mission exists that frequently produces a self-righteous sense of election. In



fact, the millennialist self-consciousness in America's religious history has been used to justify the nation's global strategy for most of its existence. However, there also exists in the religious traditions of America a tradition of "transcendental self-awareness." This tradition has a role like the prophets of the Old Testament, criticizing America's sense of election and warning of the "judgment of God" against the nation.

The majority of the Puritans in New England dreamed of the coming of the millennium and understood themselves as the "new Israel" (the elect). During the same period, Roger Williams, a Puritan leader who established Rhode Island, criticized the establishment pastors who were leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, arguing that who constitutes "New Israel" is revealed only by God at the end of time and that the people of New England, that is, the Massachusetts Bay Colony, cannot be unconditionally considered as the elect (Onishi, 1997: 79-81).

The tradition of Roger William's transcendental, self-critical understanding of America continues in the transcendental, self-critical tradition found in America's "civil religion." This tradition informed Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr (Mori: 91-99, 232-245).

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