



The Anglo-Protestant Basis of U.S. Foreign Policy

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Abstract: U.S. foreign policy thinking is based ultimately on the particular historical experience and cultural legacy of the American founding, and at the very base of that founding is the preeminence of Anglo-Protestantism. The religious heritage of the United States, a sixteenth century blend of a theological reformation and the rise of modernity in the Enlightenment, has endowed American politics with a predisposition for egalitarian, anti-hierarchical, and contractual forms, and that disposition applies as well to foreign affairs. The syntax, but not the content, of Anglo-Protestantism shapes basic attitudes particularly when political elites face crisis situations, but it is institutionalized in government and society at all levels. Six examples from the post-World War II period illustrate the case.

Over the years many general templates have been advanced to describe the core nature of U.S. foreign policy. The standard realism-versus-idealism schema was given its finest form by Robert Osgood in his 1953 book *Ideals and Self-Interest in American Foreign Policy*. More recently, moving from two to two-times-two options, we have four “schools” approach of Walter Russell Mead in *Special Providence* (2001). There are others, too, speckled through time, all useful for their parsimony to students honing their thinking about a complex subject. But all the better-known schema overlook or too heavily discount a central point of a “fish is the last to discover water” type.

Starting about three decades ago, a different synoptic sketch occurred to me, and it worked, at least as a post-nineteenth century framework, as well as any simple schema can. But I kept it to myself until, years later, a scholar published a roughly similar argument.¹ This freed me to express my own since-practiced hunch.² A few

¹ James Kurth, “The Protestant Deformation,” *Orbis*, Spring 1998; updated and refined at my bidding as, “George W. Bush and the Protestant Deformation,” *The American Interest*, Winter 2005. I kept my schema to myself because, as an observant Jew, it felt awkward to make a

others proffering similar arguments have added their voices, making for what amounts to a small “school” of thought.³

So what is this school’s basic template? It is that, denials to the contrary notwithstanding, the United States does too have an ideology that issues from a distinctive strategic culture. That strategic culture is essentially a secularized *manqué* of Anglo-Protestantism, leavened with certain key Enlightenment principles that themselves derive partly from the Abrahamic moral tradition, and of course partly from Hellenistic thought as transmuted via Rome. The ideology derived from it asserts democratic government and market capitalism, linked to the point of necessary mutual reinforcement, to be valid best-practice principles everywhere, and principles with definitive positive implications for global security. Unaware of its particularist origins, most Americans since at least the dawn of the twentieth century have believed that this secularized ideology is universally applicable and self-evidently superior to all others. Both the ideology and the fact that we rarely recognize it for what it is have gotten us into much trouble. So long as the ideology endures in its unselfconscious form, so will the trouble.

This contention is meant as no mere clever metaphor; it is put as a proposition suitable to a sustained argument. Six brief exemplary analyses follow, constituting the main burden of this essay, to illustrate that argument. I think this template explains the essence of these episodes, taken together, better than the alternatives on offer. But before we come to examples, we need to elaborate the basic template, since it is little known for an obvious “fishy” reason: Americans Christians, still the majority of the American population and the founders of American society and political culture, think we separate “church from state.” So to most who ponder such things it is *ipso facto* impossible that the former could have anything fundamental to do with the latter; to suggest otherwise smacks of civil-religious heresy. Yet it does.

critical argument implicating a Christian religious view to a mostly Christian audience. Once Professor Kurth, not just a Protestant but a deacon of his church, made an even more searing argument, my concern abated.

² For example, “Die bewaffneten Missionare,” *Die Zeit*, Jan.30, 2003 [reprinted in Michael Thumann, ed., *Der Islam und der Westen* (Berlin: Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003)]; “Reflections on the 9/11 Decade,” *The American Interest Online*, Sept. 1, 2011; “Missionary Creep in Egypt,” *The American Interest*, Autumn 2013; and others.

³ Note particularly Walter A. McDougall, *The Tragedy of American Foreign Policy* (Yale University Press, 2016). Others who have grasped a piece of the template, but without formulating a strong synoptic case for it, include William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment* (2008), and Jonathan Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex* (2011), and Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). Even Henry Kissinger has let slip side comments in this regard; for one example, note this remark from “Stability in Iraq and Beyond,” *The Washington Post*, Jan. 21, 2007: “Covert operations should not be confused with missionary work.”

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