

What's Wrong With This Picture? (A Memo To My Latino Friends)



"One Nation Under God"

You know the expression, "a picture is worth a thousand words"? Surely, this painting conveys a very strong message. This is what the painter, Jon McNaughton, said:

Christ is holding up the U.S. Constitution while behind him are the founding fathers and other patriotic heroes from the past two centuries speaking to us from the dust. They are asking us to remember the foundation of our country's greatness and the liberties defined under the constitution. The fact that Christ holds the Constitution is very significant. I believe it was a God inspired document. I believe God holds this country in the hollow of his hand. The Constitution gave Americans the kind of liberty unknown elsewhere in the world. I believe our country has been gradually weakened over the years, and we are reaching a tipping point. In the front of the painting, on the left side, are your strong Americans. On the other side are those who I believe have weakened the country. The painting is very symbolic, and I wanted it to be that way to cause people to study it and ponder its message. I hope people will understand my feelings as they learn more about the meaning of the painting...Notice [Christ] is pointing at the U.S. Constitution. This strengthens the message of His divine support for the document.

This picture is a vibrant, visual representation of one of the core religious myths of the United States and almost a creedal assumption of many North American evangelicals. The idea of "One Nation Under God" reaches back to the earliest formative period of the nation. Using language found in the Bible concerning Israel and the church, the vision depicts "God's New Israel," and conveys the divine call for the United States as a "chosen people," "city on a hill," "light to the nations," and a "New Jerusalem" set apart for a special task on earth. Recently, for example, a pastor prayed for the presidential candidate, Donald Trump: "There have only been two nations that have a relationship with God, Israel and the United States." Over time and under the influence of secularization, however, the core vision evolved into Manifest Destiny, the American Dream, "making the word safe for democracy," and American exceptionalism.

The myth is central to North American self-perception. One scholar stated an early, explicitly religious version of the vision this way:

It assumes that God, at the proper stage in the march of history, called forth certain hardy souls from the old and privileged-ridden nations; That He carried these precious few to a new world and presented them and their descendents with an environment ideally suited to the development of a free society; that in bestowing grace He also bestowed a peculiar responsibility for the success of

popular institutions. Were the Americans to fail in their experiment in self-government, they would fail not only themselves, but all men wanting or deserving to be free.

Thomas Paine, an early patriot wrote: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand...." Much more recently, Bill Clinton declared that "America remains the indispensable nation" and that "there are times when America, and only America, can make a difference between war and peace, between freedom and repression." Ronald Reagan said: "I've spoken of the shining city all my political life...[In] my mind it was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed...." George W. Bush announced: "Like generations before us, we have a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom. This is the everlasting dream of America." Barack Obama affirmed:

What makes us special — a lot of times we talk about American exceptionalism and how much we love this country, and there are so many wonderful things about our country. But what makes us the envy of the world has not just been our ability to generate incredible wealth for a few people; it's the fact that we've given everybody a chance to pursue their own true measure of happiness. That's who we are.

The myth impacts almost every aspect of North American self-consciousness, including domestic policy and foreign relations. It lies at the root of our so-called "culture wars" and disputes about abortion, death penalty, marriage, homosexuality, education, and our nation's unique relationship with Israel.

From the perspective of the rest of the world this sense of destiny and responsibility often causes others to feel that North Americans want to "save" or "enlighten" them according to their unique cultural vision. And unfortunately, the United States sometimes acts as if it only were heroic and the fountain of good in the world. (My son-in-law, who was born abroad, asked: "If North Americans are so special, what does that say about us?") In fact, my wife (also born abroad) and I often laugh about all the movies in which we are portrayed as the rescuers of humanity from all threats, whether they be terrorists, plagues, aliens, or natural disasters. And, I often tell her how fortunate she is to be married to a "Yankee"! But, it is true that the U.S. is often seen as meddling in other's internal affairs or that we have all the answers and know the best way to do everything. This is, honestly, cultural pride.

But, there is a particular aspect of the myth which plagues evangelicals in the United States: the idea that the country must return to its "roots" as a Christian republic. Hence, we often hear calls for revival and restoration. The passage from 2 Chronicles 7:14 is frequently cited with reference to the nation: "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

Surely, however, this is a grave historical and theological mistake, and as a result, a cultural idol with far-reaching consequences for the nation and church. While the biblical worldview played a critical role in the founding and formation of the nation, especially in the early period, it is evident that other worldviews have played a part, especially in the last century. But, more importantly, the painting and the myth raise a critical question for Christians in my country: Who *are* the people of God? What is the "nation" of God? Answers to these questions form ecclesiological, theological, social, and political expectations.

Or, to put it another way, which presuppositions govern our thinking and acting: the biblical worldview or North American mythology? The Bible or idolatry?