

Myths, Gods, and Nations

Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD; and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance.

Psalm 33:12

Benedict Anderson's popular conceptualization of a nation as "an imagined political community" that is "imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (1983, p. 6) is a useful pedagogical device for explicating how myths underpin the formation of nations and nationalism. The national community is *imagined* because its members need not know the actual behaviors or even existence of other members to believe they are in communion. *Limited* indicates that national members see the nation's population as finite, and draw clear boundaries between who is and who is not a member. Finally, *sovereign* signifies that national members understand the nation as self-determined.¹ Communities embrace national myths to explain to themselves that they are bound together for a purpose as opposed to happenstance (Lorenz 2008; Clement 2014). Myths connect us to each other, give us a sense of self-determination, and establish boundaries that separate us from those who are not us.

Myths are the bedrock of nationalism (Zelinsky 1988; Clement 2014). Nationalism is the building block for national identity (Gellner 1983; Smith 1991), though like the myths on which it is based, nationalism is linked to exclusionary policies and violence (Allport 1927; de Figueiredo and Elkins 2003). Just as myths possess an affective aspect and legitimize group structures, nationalism "gives legitimacy to the state, and inspires

its citizens to feel an emotional attachment towards it” (Kellas 1998, p. 1). The basis of nationalism can be claimed to be civic ideals or ethnic connections depending on the myths to which the nation’s members ascribe. Like those myths, nationalism plays different roles. It has served as the source of liberation for oppressed groups as well as a source of justification for those who would oppress them. For the groups it motivates, nationalism is a force for political, economic, and cultural action (Kohn 1944; Snyder 2000; Henderson 2019).

1.1 NATIONALISM AS AN ELITE TOOL

Scholars of state-building view nationalism as an ideology used by elites to generate a singular understanding of the nation, to achieve specific goals. Ernest Gellner defines it as “primarily a political principle, which holds the political and national unit should be congruent” (1983, p. 1). John Breuilly comes to a similar conclusion arguing “there exists a nation with an explicit and peculiar character; the interests and values of this nation take priority over all other interests and values; the nation must be as independent as possible” (1985, p. 3). Jack Snyder points directly to the role of elites in fostering nationalism, defining it “as the doctrine that a people who see themselves as distinct in their culture, history, institutions, or principles should rule themselves in a political system that expresses and protects those distinctive characteristics” (2000, p. 13). Taking this political understanding of nationalism further, James Kellas argues nationalist ideology provides a justification for elites to pursue their self-interests (1998, p. 31). Elites use nationalist frames to advance their interests and alter the considerations citizens bring to bear in their decision-making (Riker 1996; Chong 2000; Druckman 2011; Stone 2012). Much as any successful frame is constrained by local culture and customs (Chong 2000), nationalist rhetoric is constrained by local norms and traditions (Geertz 1973). After all, as Hans Kohn puts it, “nationalism is not a natural phenomenon . . . it is a product of the growth of social and intellectual factors at a certain stage of history” (1944, p. 6). While the love of family and community is “natural” because the individual routinely interacts with its members, a love of nation requires the “identification with the life and aspirations of uncounted millions who we shall never know, with a territory which we shall never visit in its entirety” (Kohn 1944, p. 9). Because elites need individuals to contribute to the goals of a large group, they need to create a sense of common fate that motivates people to contribute to the larger good (Snyder 2000). Clifford Geertz

argues the first stage of nationalism requires a “deliberately constructed” concept of the nation. Further, he contends nationalism is not the reflection, cause, expression, or engine of the development of new states, “but the thing itself” (1973, p. 252). In line with this understanding, Eric Hobsbawm argues “nationalism comes before nations” (Hobsbawm 1992, p. 10). Myth-making about the nation is how elites craft an idea of a nation that resonates (Edsman 1972; Lorenz 2008; Clement 2014). It is how, to borrow from Anderson (1983) again, nations come to think of themselves as old.

1.1.1 Cultural Reproduction of Nationalistic Myths

Using myths as the basis for a nationalist ideology provides elites with a more effective way of justifying their nationalism, and this works to the extent that their ideologies resonate with citizens through rituals, symbols, and communication (Edsman 1972). Eric Hobsbawm frames this effectively: While the idea of a nation is “constructed essentially from above,” it “cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below” (1992, p. 10). Similarly, for Rogers Brubaker, nationalism is a set of “nation-oriented idioms, practices, and possibilities that are continuously available or ‘endemic’ in modern cultural and political life” (1996, p. 10). Nationalism is thus not just a private good for elites but a potent political force because it is constantly transferred, socialized, and internalized among the masses.

In a famous 1882 lecture at the Sorbonne, Ernest Renan argued that nations are not the consequences of dynasties, language, religion, race, or geography, but that they are a “soul” based on two facets: the common possession of “a rich legacy of memories” and “the desire to continue to invest” in that heritage (1990, p. 19). Benedict Anderson urges scholars to move from analyzing nationalism from a political standpoint to analyzing it as part of a “large cultural system” (1983, p. 12). Michael Billig argues our constant focus on “hot” nationalism in developing nations ignores the “banal” nationalism in western developed nations. In those “older” nations, such as the United States or the United Kingdom, the idea of nationhood is a constant backdrop shaping politics, culture, and even the media (1995). Anthony Smith also emphasizes the cultural role of nationalism but goes further, arguing it “is the secular, modern equivalent of the pre-modern, sacred myth of ethnic election” (1991, p. 84). As a “civic religion,” it inspires intellectuals and serves as the foundation for language, rituals, symbols, and practices, which continually reproduce the

idea of the nation among its people. Smith also argues the ideological manifestation of nationalism through social movements can only emerge after “the gestation of nationalism as language-and-symbolism, and as consciousness-and-aspiration” (1991, p. 85).

1.1.2 Nationalism as Shaper of Attitudes and Behavior

Routinely exposed to the language, symbols, and rituals of nationalism, citizens internalize this meaning of the nation. Nationality’s main criteria, Floyd Allport recognized almost a century ago, “are psychological” (1927, p. 292). Elites and cultural institutions are critical in fostering national attachment through the telling of national stories and repeated rituals; however, at the end of the day, the idea of a nation exists only in the mind of the individual. So, when individuals no longer believe in the nation, elite and institutional efforts and desires notwithstanding, it ceases to exist, or, less dramatically, its power to direct collective behavior is weakened. It is through institutions that individuals actualize their idea of the nation and act. Those who adhere to nationalist perspectives view the nation as an “overperson” possessing emotions and purpose requiring loyalty and devotion (Allport 1927, pp. 293–94). The nation embodies the person, and the nation’s honor is linked to the individual’s honor. Kohn describes it well: “nationalism is first and foremost a state of mind, an act of consciousness” (1944, p. 10). From this foundation, contemporary psychological studies of nationalism examine how it joins a person’s consciousness and shapes their understanding of the world. In their discussion of American nationalism, Bart Bonikowski and Paul DiMaggio define nationalism as “the complex of ideas, sentiments, and representations by which Americans understand the United States and their relationship to it” (2016, p. 949). In contrast to this neutral definition, other scholars view nationalism as an emotional, even irrational, psychological phenomenon. Wilbur Zelinsky characterizes nationalism as an “intense devotion to the nation, that real or supposed community of individuals who are convinced they share a common set of traditions, beliefs, and cultural characteristics” (1988, p. 17). Other definitions not only emphasize this strong link to the nation but also include beliefs of national superiority (Citrin, Wong, and Duff 2001; de Figueiredo and Elkins 2003; McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle 2016). Like religion, nationalism provides a way of understanding how the world works. Nationalism helps individuals understand their world and their role in it. Like religious teachings and folk myths, it answers common questions, such as who am

I, why am I here, how should I behave, and who are my people? As a psychological resource, it simplifies the world and gives individuals a structure for processing information that can be applied to various decisions, from political choices to supermarket purchases (Allport 1927; Citrin, Wong, and Duff 2001; de Figueiredo and Elkins 2003; Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016).

The discussion of nationalism thus far reflects a bias toward its virtues for building communities and providing the basis for functioning, legitimate nation-states. But the darker side of nationalism has been equally the object of scholarly inquiry. Expressing his disdain for nationalism, George Steiner wrote:

Nationalism is the venom of our age. It has brought Europe to the edge of ruin. It drives the new states of Asian and Africa like crazed lemmings . . . Every mob impulse in modern politics, every totalitarian design, feeds on nationalism, on the drug of hatred which makes human beings bare their teeth across a wall, across ten yards of waste ground . . . If the potential of civilization is not destroyed, we shall have to develop more complex, more provisional loyalties. (1998, p. 152)

George Kellas is less strident but acknowledges that nationalism is double-edged, that it can “protect or destroy freedom, establish peace or lead to war” (1998, p. 41). Such grappling with nationalism’s many effects is reflected by Geertz, who argues nationalism deserves its negative image, as it has wrought “havoc upon humanity,” even as he posits it “has been a driving force in some of the most creative changes in history” (Geertz 1973, pp. 253–54).

Why is this? Well, by identifying the community members who belong (the in-group), nationalism necessarily must exclude others (the out-group). Further, the emotional and shallow thinking produced by nationalism encourages beliefs in zero-sum relations with outsiders (Sidanius et al. 1997; de Figueiredo and Elkins 2003; Parker and Barreto 2013). Allport views the idea of the nation as noble; however, he acknowledges its emotional aspect makes it easy to “fall prey to the clever manipulations of the jingoist” (1927, pp. 299–300). The centrality of the emotional aspect of nationalism requires us to understand the myths a community adopts that dictate the content of its nationalism. To this task, we now turn.

1.2 THE MYTH OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

The myths a nation adopts influence how it defines itself and how its members understand themselves and their role in the nation and world

(Zelinsky 1988; Lorenz 2008). The American case is unique because its nationalism is rooted in the belief that its ideals are transcendent. A central myth of America is that its nationalism is not founded on the basis of territory, religion, or language. Susan-Mary Grant argues the uniqueness of the American case provides one of the best examples for demonstrating how myths shaped a nation and its nationalism. She states these myths were a way to “produce unity from disunity, consensus from conflict” (1997, p. 90). The distinctiveness of the colonies, along with their conflicts with each other, made it imperative that the nation generated national myths quickly to forge an American identity that brought them together and distinguished them from the British (Zelinsky 1988; Grant 1997).

Numerous myths were created to help unify the young nation, but the myth of American exceptionalism – the idea that the United States has something special other countries wish to achieve – was the one that was most effective in capturing the public’s attention. Kohn argues Americans see themselves as different from all other nations because they share the belief they had developed a nation that is “the greatest possible approximation to perfection” (1944, p. 291). Many Americans believe America overcame the corruptions plaguing Europe to create a form of government that recognized rights as nature intended. Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* vehemently argues for the separation of the colonies from England because the monarchies throughout Europe perverted natural governance of humanity (Paine 1776). Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s thoughts on the new men of America, qualitatively different from their European brethren, are worth reading at length:

What then is the American, this new man? He is either an European, or the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle. (1782, p. 33)

De Crèvecoeur’s is an evocative proclamation of American exceptionalism, which Wilbur Zelinsky more prosaically describes as the belief the

nation embodies “the materialization of novel ideas that had been smoldering among the intellectually and religiously disaffected . . . , but were first to reach criticality and burst into flames in such places as Boston and Philadelphia in the 1770s” (1988, p. 27). Seymour Martin Lipset noted the American claim that it was the first “new” nation, where membership is “creedal” or “civic,” rooted in shared political and civic ideals, such as equality and the right to liberty, rather than “ethnic” or “sanguinal,” based in premodern notions such as ethnicity, language, or religion (1979). This idea has been reaffirmed so often, from Alexis de Tocqueville to Louis Hartz, that Gunnar Myrdal referred to American nationalism as the American Creed (Myrdal 1944; Tocqueville 1945; Hartz 1991).² Writing at the same time as Myrdal, Hans Kohn argued,

the American nation has not been determined by “natural” factors of blood and soil, nor by common memories of a long history. It was formed by an idea, a universal idea. Loyalty to America meant therefore loyalty to that idea, and as the idea was universal, everyone could be included. (1944, p. 324)

Further, scholars note that because Americans see themselves as the group that perfected society, their nationalism is one that looks forward, not backward; that celebrates not only its past, but what its goodness and ideals will yet accomplish (Kohn 1944; Tuveson 1968; Zelinsky 1988). However, the conviction that America is a model to the world implies that any nation which does not meet its standards is deficient, even corrupt, and a threat to the ideals upon which Americans believe their nation was uniquely founded (Kohn 1944; Hughes 2004).

Celebrations of national documents and monuments dedicated to national heroes are all part of the myth of American exceptionalism. Americans revel in grand displays celebrating their history through festivities, rituals, and reenactments (Adam 1937; Zelinsky 1988). These events are supposed to serve as reminders that throwing off the yoke of British oppression and European corruption allowed Americans to create a nation that left men to live as they truly should (Grant 1997). Beyond these overt events, the myth of exceptionalism pervades all aspects of American life. Myrdal again: “All means of intellectual communication are utilized to stamp [ideas of American exceptionalism] into everybody’s mind. The schools teach them, the churches preach them” (1944, p. 8). The symbols of American nationalism are deeply embedded in mainstream American culture. The daily reciting of the pledge of allegiance in school, the singing of the national anthem before sporting events, the placement of American flags in private businesses, and the incorporation

of national symbols in commercials are all ways American nationalism sustains itself (Billig 1995).

The constant reification of American exceptionalism, its heroes, and its symbols fuels intense outpourings of national affection. Data from the International Social Survey Programme's 2013 National Identity Survey reveal that US citizens express higher levels of pride than those in other developed nations (see Figure 1.1). More than two-thirds of American respondents say they are very proud of being a member of their nation. The next highest proportion are the Irish (56 percent), followed by respondents from Iceland (47.3 percent). National pride is measured using two scales. The first captures pride in the nation's *actions* ($\alpha = .83$), such as how its democracy works, its political influence in the world, economic achievement, security system, and fair treatment of groups within its borders.³ The second focuses on pride in the nation's purported *achievements* ($\alpha = .59$), whether in scientific, technological, athletic, or artistic domains, both historical and in the present day. As Figure 1.1 demonstrates, American citizens express relatively higher levels of pride. On the action scale, only the Norwegians and Swiss score significantly higher. Americans are on par with Danes and Germans, and score significantly higher than all the remaining nations surveyed. Regarding achievements, Americans score significantly higher than ten of the nations studied and are statistically tied with the others. Americans might not be alone in feeling great pride in their nation, but they certainly are second to none in the level of the pride they express.

Along with generating a sense of pride, the exceptionalism myth also implies a comparison between the greatness of the United States and shortcomings of other nations (Meyer and Royer 2001). Scholars have routinely characterized American nationalism as narcissistic or chauvinistic (Kohn 1944; Savelle 1962; Zelinsky 1988; Citrin, Wong, and Duff 2001). Other surveys document that members of other nations – and many Americans too – associate narcissism and arrogance with being American (Terracciano and McCrae 2007; Miller et al. 2015). To assess the extent to which Americans distinguish themselves from other nations regarding a sense of national superiority, we created a measure of national hubris. *Hubris* ($\alpha = .69$) is measured by agreement with statements about only wanting to be a member of their country, the belief that the world would be better if more countries were like their own, and the belief that their country is better than most other countries. Our analysis confirms Americans' distinctive hubris. They score significantly higher on the hubris scale than all other nations except for the Japanese. Another aspect of this sense of superiority is a denial of national transgressions since the narcissism bred by the myth of American

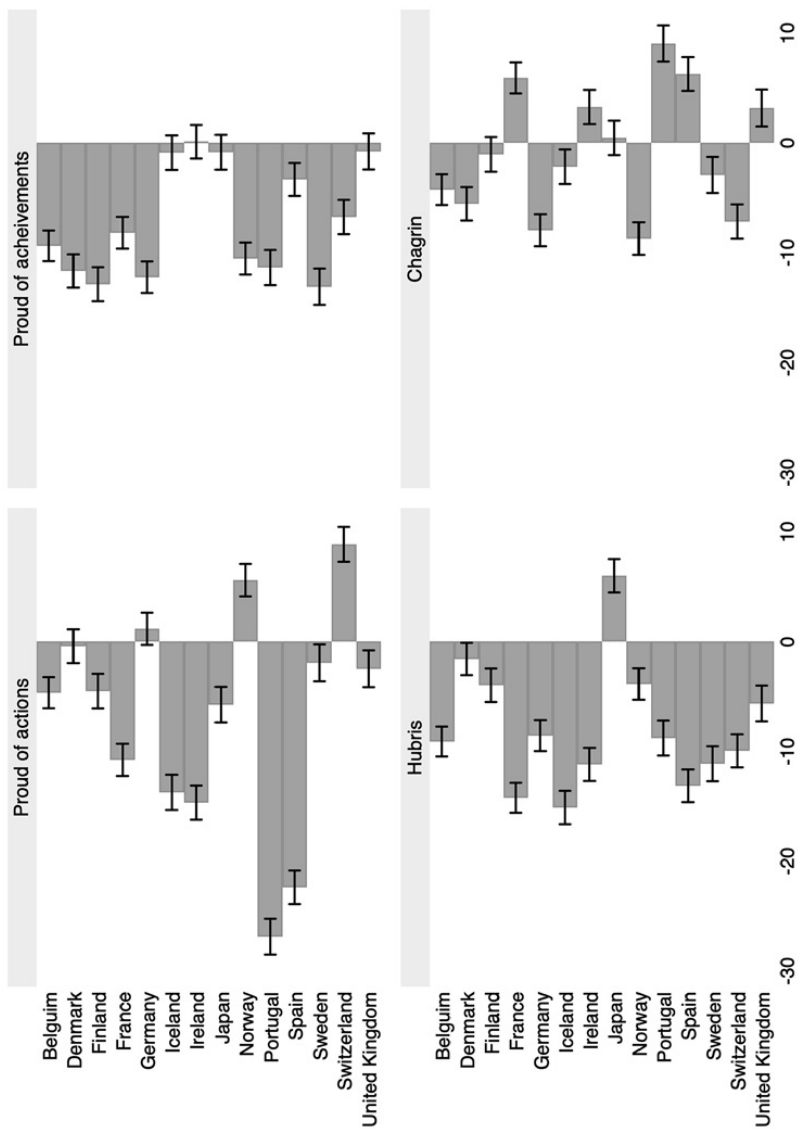


FIGURE 1.1 Difference between citizens of other developed nations and the United States regarding feelings toward the nation

exceptionalism also fosters a sense of national innocence that makes it difficult for Americans to acknowledge their failures and misdeeds. We measure this with what we call the national chagrin scale. *National chagrin* ($\alpha = .57$) is measured through agreement with statements about whether one ever feels ashamed by her country's actions, whether one feels less proud than she would like to be, or if she believes the world would be a better place if the country acknowledged its shortcomings. A revealing comparison is to France, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom, who were the primary colonizers of the Americas and were heavily engaged in the Atlantic slave trade. The populations of all four states reveal much higher levels of chagrin than do Americans. But the United States is equally guilty of colonialism and slavery; thus, its significantly lower level of chagrin reveals the consistency with which Americans cling tightly to the myth of national innocence.

1.3 RELIGION AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Scholars have often compared nationalism to religion or argued nationalism is a modern replacement for religion (Anderson 1983; Smith 2000). John Armstrong contends religion and religious institutions were central in establishing American nationalism (1982). The religious networks developed through the revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provided the most effective method for communicating the idea of a national identity to the masses. George Thomas argues the Great Awakenings that swept through America in the 1730s and again in the 1790s played a key role in establishing the myths that formed an American identity (1989). Consistent with Benedict Anderson's assertion that print capitalism accelerated the spread of nationalism, access to mass printing provided religious groups the ability to distribute sermons and pamphlets that imagined America as a nation, not just a political collective (Haselby 2015). Early American nationalists were not merely religious zealots; their nationalism and religiosity were tightly intertwined (Lieven 2004; Blum 2005). Fueled by millennialist beliefs, they saw America as "the triumph of Christian principles," a "holy utopia" (Tuveson 1968, p. 34). Millennialism is a product of the Protestant Reformation, which reinterpreted the end-of-times story in the book of Revelations. This reinterpretation altered it from being a cosmic battle waged between God and Satan to a battle in which humanity would partake. God would work through nations to accomplish victory over the forces of evil, and in doing so, a divine nation that properly reflected God's laws would be formed. Prominent biblical scholar David Austin's *The Downfall of*

Mystical Babylon, published in 1794, articulates the faith that the young United States is God's hero to the world:

Behold the regnum montis, the kingdom of the mountain, begun on the Fourth of July, 1776, when the *birth* of the MAN-CHILD—the hero of civil and religious liberty took place in these United States. Let them read the predictions of heaven respecting the increase in his dominion – that he was *to rule all nations with a rod of iron*; that is, bring them into complete and absolute subjection; and that the young hero might be equal to this mighty conquest, he is supported by an omnipotent arm; he is *caught up unto God, and to this throne*. (1794, p. 392)

To exemplify this millennialist belief about the connection between their new nation and divine prophecy, the Founders chose the eagle as its national symbol. The eagle plays a prominent role in the book of Revelations, offering a warning to the world's inhabitants of impending judgment, and its wings are used to carry people to safety. From this, loyalty to God and to the nation became synonymous (Tuveson 1968; Beam 1976).

These nationalists held that the success of the American experiment was because of divine selection. Americans were better than other nations because they were conducting themselves the way God had intended (Hughes 2004). The ability for a disparate group of colonies to come together with an untrained army to defeat British forces, and its endurance of faith to overcome the challenges posed by the Civil War, were signs that Americans were the new chosen people and the United States was divinely favored (Tuveson 1968; Grant 1997). A common belief was that much like God protected David in his battle against Goliath, America would overcome insurmountable evils because it held God's favor. This faith in an ordained connection between divine will and national success has persisted undimmed over the nation's almost 250-year history.

There has been much discussion by commentators about the decline of religion in the United States; however, personal religiosity is still relatively stronger in the United States compared to other industrialized nations (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Political scientists have often nodded to the religious nature of American nationalism, but rigorous research examining the religious dimension of American nationalism is limited. Most of our knowledge of the connection between American religion and nationalism has come from sociologists, historians, and theologians. When political scientists have examined these ideas, it has mainly been to explain US foreign policy. Further, previous examinations have operated at the national level. By focusing on an ideology, which we refer to as American

religious exceptionalism, this book documents its prevalence at the individual level and demonstrates how it influences public opinion in a variety of realms.

I.4 AMERICAN RELIGIOUS EXCEPTIONALISM

American religious exceptionalism is an ideology that perceives the nation as divinely inspired, favored, and called upon to carry out a divine mission. It is a fusion of religious identity and national pride. The nation is integral to the fulfillment of a divine plan. American religious exceptionalism reflects what Mark Juergensmeyer defines as ideological religious nationalism. This is in contrast with ethnic religious nationalism, which refers to contexts in which groups seek greater political authority over a region, which often involves the fusion of religion with a “culture of domination or liberation” (1996, p. 4). Examples of this would be the struggle of both Protestants and Catholics in Ireland to gain greater political power or that of the *Hindutva* movement in India that seeks to establish India as a Hindu nation. In contrast, ideological religious nationalism is based on ideas. In this instance, politics has been religionized and “compatibility with religious goals becomes the criterion for an acceptable political platform” (Juergensmeyer 1996, p. 5). Furthermore, “national aspirations become fused with religious quests for purity and redemption” (Juergensmeyer 1996, p. 6). Secular leaders are reviled as being part of a conspiracy to undermine the nation. Examples of ideological religious nationalism would include the Islamic Revolution in Iran and Christian nationalism in the United States (Whitehead and Perry 2020).

As an ideology that politicizes religion and religionizes politics, religious nationalism melds the two, rendering piety and patriotism indistinguishable. Adherence to American religious exceptionalism betrays the image of civic nationalism the nation has promoted. Instead, it reflects primordialism, the belief that a nation should be constructed based on a common ethnicity, culture, or history (Smith 2001). It is exclusionary in identifying who and why individuals are national heroes, as well as the importance of certain documents. It makes the nation a “sacred communion,” one that combines religious and political traditions together and often confounds religious leaders with political leaders and vice versa. The result of the widespread adherence to a religious exceptionalism ideology is that the legitimacy of the nation is no longer based on political principles but religious doctrine. Religious miracles become national celebrations, and Holy Scriptures “are reinterpreted as national epics” (Smith 2000, p. 799).

While scholars have long noted the similarities between nationalism and religion, specifically their abilities to create communities and norms, and to stir intense emotions, the concepts are more often than not treated as mutually exclusive (Kohn 1944; Armstrong 1982). Nationalism has often been framed as the secular replacement of religion, with Anthony Smith characterizing it as a “political religion” (Smith 2001). However, some scholars have noted the role religious traditions and symbolism have played in advancing nationalist ideologies. This is especially the case in the United States, where religious practices and symbols have been co-opted to represent the nation’s purpose and provide guidance to its citizens (Smith 2000; Herzog 2011; Whitehead and Perry 2020). The best example of this is what Robert Bellah famously refers to as American civil religion, which is the interweaving of religion into American social and political life through “a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity” (1967, p. 7). The American civil religion “reaffirms, among other things, the religious legitimation of the lightest political authority” (p. 3). The American civil religion calls on Americans individually and collectively to fulfill the obligation of carrying “out God’s will on earth” (p. 4).

We build on Bellah’s foundational insight by incorporating several components scholars have highlighted since he introduced the concept of civil religion. Bellah recognized the negative consequences of a civil religion – think Manifest Destiny and American Imperialism, but overall, he viewed it as a positive or at least benign force. Other scholars portray it as a dichotomy, either encouraging a narcissism and superiority to other nations or encouraging humility and a brotherhood of nations (Marty 1974; Bulman 1991; Kent and Spickard 1994). Robert Wuthnow discusses American civil religion as having both liberal and conservative dimensions (1988). The liberal dimension argues the nation is blessed, not chosen. It views the United States as part of a global brotherhood with other nations. In this brotherhood, America’s duty is to work with other nations to achieve global peace and human advancement. The conservative dimension emphasizes the idea of the United States as a divinely chosen nation, reveres the Founding Fathers as almost sacred figures, and regards the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as quasi-sacred texts. It emphasizes exceptionalism and evangelizes the need for other nations to emulate the United States. In addition to the liberal–conservative typology of civil religion, others contend it indicates a type of divinely inspired mission. This mission compels the nation to lead all other nations and bring about a higher state of living (Tiryakian 1982; Pierard and Linder 1988; Coles 2002). This

mission-oriented understanding of American civil religion is a reflection of what Wilson Moses refers to a “hard-line messianism,” which “developed into the doctrine of white racial supremacy, ruthless expansionism, religious intolerance, and economic insensitivity” (Moses 1982, p. 8). Philip Gorski (2017) contends that civil religion is a mixture of secular and religious thought that draws on civic republicanism and prophetic religion. In recognizing the importance of both secular and religious thoughts, it calls for both to be a part of the public space, while also enforcing borders on them. Gorski’s civil religion exists between two diametrically opposed poles. At one end is radical secularism, which calls for taking religion out of the public discourse and making it a purely private phenomenon. On the other end is religious nationalism, which seeks to shut out secular thought and reasoning. Emulating some of the characteristics of Wuthnow’s conservative civil religion, Gorski refers to religious nationalism as “the dark side of civil religion” (p. 35). It is fueled by two narratives – conquest and the apocalypse – that breed hubris, separation, and violence. The narrative of conquest calls on followers to seek “vengeance on the unrighteous” (p. 21). The apocalyptic narrative emphasizes an eventual war between good and evil, where the good will reign supreme for eternity.

Our definition and conceptualization of American religious exceptionalism is based upon these definitions of the darker conservative aspects of civil religion. We argue that religious exceptionalism functions as a buttress for beliefs about American exceptionalism and its messianic approach to global politics. Further, religious exceptionalism serves as an undergirding belief system explaining how to define the nation as well as shaping governmental and individual behavioral norms. In our analysis, American religious exceptionalism uses civil religion as a way to legitimize itself, while in actuality being antagonistic toward it.

Religious exceptionalism structures citizen beliefs by establishing three core aspects of identity: position, purpose, and origin. The disciples of American religious exceptionalism believe that a higher power played a role in the creation of the nation by setting aside a territory for a specific group to inhabit. They believe the nation’s successes and failures are linked to divine judgment. They interpret times of struggle as divine tests or punishments. This belief system is exemplified by the tradition of issuing jeremiads, religious explanations for why a “chosen” people face tragedies (Bercovitch 1978; Moses 1982). Before landing in America, Puritan leaders, such as John Winthrop and John Cotton, issued warnings of God’s swift and harsh punishment if they went astray. Thomas

Jefferson offered his own jeremiad in his lament about God's punishment for slavery:

And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest. (Jefferson 1999, pp. 174–75)

Actual abolitionists, both Black and White, issued their own jeremiads warning the nation of divine punishment for allowing the atrocity of slavery to continue (Bercovitch 1978; Moses 1982; Walker 1995). In his second inaugural address, President Lincoln offered his own jeremiad:

If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came.

(Lincoln 1865)

Prominent disciples of American religious exceptionalism have also issued their own jeremiads. Under the specter of a war with the USSR, evangelist Billy Graham came to national prominence, issuing warnings of how America's divine protection would be removed if the nation did not correct its immoral ways. In response to the September 11, 2001, attacks, Jerry Falwell ranted that the tragedy was caused because Americans had taken God out of society:

The ACLU has got to take a lot of blame for this. And I know I'll hear from them for this, but throwing God ... successfully with the help of the federal court system ... out of the public square, out of the schools, the abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked and when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. ... I really believe that the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who try to secularize America ... I point the finger in their face and say you helped this happen.⁴

In response to the devastation caused to New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, Franklin Graham, Billy Graham's son, argued it was divine punishment for it being a "wicked city."⁵ In response to the 2012 Sandy Hook elementary school shooting that left twenty-six dead, including twenty

children, James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, stated: “I think we have turned our back on the Scripture and on God Almighty and I think he has allowed judgment to fall upon us. I think that’s what’s going on.”⁶ And, more recently, in April 2020, Pat Robertson opined that the coronavirus pandemic would only end if Americans ended their “wicked ways.”⁷

Disciples of American religious exceptionalism also believe the Almighty has defined their purpose through an enduring and unquestioned national mission. While certain aspects of a nation’s purpose are malleable, its central mission, handed down by the Supreme Being, cannot be changed. Because of this, its disciples hold a narrow view of who is part of their nation or who can lead it. Here’s Pat Robertson again:

The Constitution of the United States, for instance, is a marvelous document for self-government by Christian people. But the minute you turn the document into the hands of non-Christian and atheistic people they can use it to destroy the very foundation of our society.⁸

Nor are such ideas limited to the lunatic fringe of American society. In 2019, then US Attorney General William Barr warned that the waning influence of Judeo-Christian values relative to other religions and secularism constituted a major threat to the nation and its ability to uphold the Constitution (2019).

1.5 THE CULTURE AND POLITICS OF AMERICAN RELIGIOUS EXCEPTIONALISM

American religious exceptionalism has cultural and political functions that are steeped in a long-held American tradition of supporting religious institutions. Culturally speaking, it is inculcated through everyday practices. To many, the American use of religious language and symbols seems innocuous, but they serve as repeated practices and behaviors that allow religious exceptionalism to remain an enduring aspect of American social and political life. Politically, elites often invoke the language of God and nation to justify their policy goals and justify their ideological stances (Domke and Coe 2008; Haselby 2015). As a result, God and nation are ever present in America’s political proceedings, on the campaign trail, as well as deeply entrenched in its political institutions.

American religious exceptionalism is continually reproduced through rituals and practices that are routinely embedded in daily life to the extent

that many people do not even recognize them as religious. Others choose to ignore them. Obvious examples of the reproduction of religious exceptionalism are arguments over prayer in school or the display of the Ten Commandments on government property. However, there are several practices that may go unnoticed, such as the words “under God” in the pledge of allegiance, which American children regularly recite in school. The national motto is “In God We Trust.” The back of the national seal displays the Eye of Providence, also referred to as the “All Seeing Eye of God,” and the Latin phrase *Annuī cœptis*, which translates to Providence (or God) “favors our undertakings.” Further, the display of the American flag in church sanctuaries extends the sacredness of the place of worship to the sacred nation. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Americans began singing “God Bless America,” as opposed to other patriotic songs such as “America the Beautiful” or “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee.” Such cultural practices may appear benign, but together they constitute a process that reinforces the linkage between the nation and the divine and reaffirms the spirit of American religious exceptionalism in the national psyche.

Political leaders have used religious imagery to shape the nation from its founding. James Byrd argues that many of those who chose to fight in the American Revolution had a limited understanding of the philosophical and ideological reasoning behind American independence, but through the work of pastors, they understood the theological reasoning for independence (2013). Religion served as their basis for understanding their world. Ideas about the declaration of rights and representative government did not have the same emotional impact as a sermon. Because of this, clergy played a central role in making the revolution meaningful to the average colonist. These clergy linked the ideological arguments and the fight for independence to divine will (Wood 1998; Byrd 2013). Recognizing the power of religion, Thomas Paine, who elsewhere openly questioned the truth of the Bible (Byrd 2013), used scripture and Biblical imagery to justify his call for American independence in *Common Sense* (Paine 1776). The success of *Common Sense* has been attributed to the fact that it mimicked the meter of a sermon (Stout 1977).

The idea of divine favoritism toward nations was embedded in the minds of the British colonists long before the Puritans arrived in New England (Hudson 1970). However, the Puritans served as the impetus for American religious exceptionalism. The Puritans viewed Britain as corrupt and unworthy of God’s favor and saw the colonies as a place to start anew and fulfill their divine destiny (Hudson 1970; Hughes 2004). Puritans

referred to America as “New Jerusalem,” a place chosen for God’s people. “God had led the Jews out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the Promised Land. Now God led the Puritans out of England, across the Atlantic Ocean, and into another promised land” (Hughes 2004, p. 30). Escaping the corruption of Europe allowed colonists to establish a “New Israel” where they could properly practice their religion and governance as God intended. The Puritans, who found significant financial success in the new land, saw America as the pinnacle of civilization. John Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity” memorably articulates this view: “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us” (1630). This view of America and its residents as part of divine plan spread through the First Great Awakening in which the colonies were swept up in a decade-long religious revival. These revivals embedded the idea that colonists were a distinct group created by a divine force and commissioned to save the world from its degradation (Hudson 1970; Hughes 2004; Prothero 2012). In *White Jacket*, novelist Herman Melville articulates this missionary aspect of America’s purpose: “We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time, we bear the ark of the liberties of the world” (Melville 1988, p. 150). He continues:

God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear. We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours. In our youth is our strength; in our inexperience, our wisdom. At a period when other nations have but lisped, our deep voice is heard afar. Long enough, have we been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in us. (Melville 1988, p. 151)

The Founding Fathers understood the implementation of democracy as honoring divine will. By establishing a democracy, they had returned the world to the order God intended (Hughes 2004). Because of the success of the “great experiment,” many saw the spread of democracy as their divinely commanded duty (Hughes 2004; Monten 2005). As the world’s “political Messiah,” it was the duty of the United States to spread its way of life through all means possible. The nation’s constitutional design reflects the Founders’ beliefs; even though it established a separation of church and state, it encouraged religious practice and proselytization. This compromise of religion’s role in the national identity embodied a free enterprise spirit of religiosity that only encouraged the myth of a divine global mission to spread the nation’s democratic values. While sometimes interpreted as constitutional moderation of religion’s role in

the nation, the resulting religiosity of the American model rivals most religious states, especially in the widely held ideology of the nation's inherently religious purpose.

Even with the success of the new nation and its alignment with the divine vision, many members were concerned about the future of religion in America. At the beginning of the American Revolution, most Americans were unchurched. One estimate is that only 10–15 percent of Americans belonged to a church (Kramnick and Moore 2005). Further, many of the Founding Fathers, including the nation's first four presidents, ranged from being nontraditional Christians to Deists. Thomas Jefferson, who had made his skepticisms about Christianity well-known and championed religious liberty, was the target of repeated attacks as religious leaders viewed him as the enemy of a religious nation. During Jefferson's 1800 presidential campaign, a minister printed the following in the *New England Palladium*:

Should the infidel Jefferson be elected to the Presidency, the seal of death is that moment set on our holy religion, our churches will be prostrated, and some infamous prostitute, under the title of Reason, will preside the sanctuaries now devoted to the worship of the Most High.

(quoted in Kramnick and Moore 2005, p. 89)

Additionally, the ideological similarities between the American and French Revolutions, combined with excessive violence and rejection of religion among the French, increased colonial anxiety about an American "terror." Economic changes and expansion into the western territories sparked fear that without structured Christian instruction the nation would not realize civilization. The Second Great Awakening developed in response to these fears (Hughes 2004; Lacorne 2011; Haselby 2015). Led by individuals such as Lyman Beecher, Evangelical preachers swept through the nation, arguing that America was founded to be a Christian nation and seeking to enforce long-forgotten blasphemy laws. Tapping into the heritage of the Puritans, they campaigned for laws protecting the Sabbath, such as the end of Sunday mail delivery (Kramnick and Moore 2005; Stone 2010). By the end of the Second Great Awakening, a third of Americans were church members and the myth of a Christian nation was imprinted on the American imagination (Johnson 2004; Howe 2007).

The establishment of a Christian nation in the minds of Americans helped bring about the period of Manifest Destiny, during which elites argued God ordained the United States to spread westward and consume

the entire continent. Manifest destiny is the rhetorical zenith of American religious exceptionalism. Arguing it was their religious duty to expand the nation, religious and political elites convinced ordinary Americans that westward expansion was heavenly ordained (Hudson 1970; Hughes 2004). When the mission of extending the nation to the Pacific Ocean was completed, many began to call for overseas expansion. Consuming the continent was not enough to fulfill divine wishes. The imperial era of American foreign policy, as with any nation's quest for imperialism, was fueled by the ideological belief that as God's chosen people they had a responsibility to spread their knowledge to the world (Hughes 2004). No longer satisfied to serve merely as a beacon, it was now their responsibility to proselytize their way of life (Moses 1982). Progressives, such as Josiah Strong and Senator Albert J. Beveridge, saw this as a duty of servitude to help their brothers and sisters in less developed areas (Hudson 1970; Monten 2005; Moore 2017). While Strong argued for a servant role in colonizing the Philippines and Cuba, Beveridge took a more patronizing tone:

The dominant notes in American life henceforth will be not only self-government and internal development, but also administration and world improvement. It is the arduous but splendid mission of our race. It is ours to govern in the name of civilized liberty. It is ours to administer order and law in the name of human progress. It is ours to chasten, that we may be kind. It is ours to cleanse, that we may save. It is ours to build, that free institutions may finally enter and abide. It is ours to bear the torch of Christianity where midnight has reigned a thousand years. It is ours to reinforce that thin red line which constitutes the outposts of civilization all around the world. (1970, pp. 117–18)

Such rhetoric fueled support for the Spanish–American War and the annexation of Pacific territories.

The use of this rhetoric declined in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but revived in the latter half of the twentieth century. Figure 1.2 charts overt references to God in presidential inaugural addresses, visualizing their dramatic increase during the twentieth century. Furthermore, the use of other religious language, terms such as Almighty, Providence, prayer, or the Bible, also increased.

We can normalize the number of religious mentions per 1,000 words. Lincoln's second inaugural address, given during the Civil War, outpaces all the others with a rate of 17.1 religious mentions per 1,000 words. There is a steep decline after Lincoln, followed by a sustained resurgence near the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. During World War II and the Cold War, American religious

Frequency of the use of god and other religious language in presidential inaugural addresses

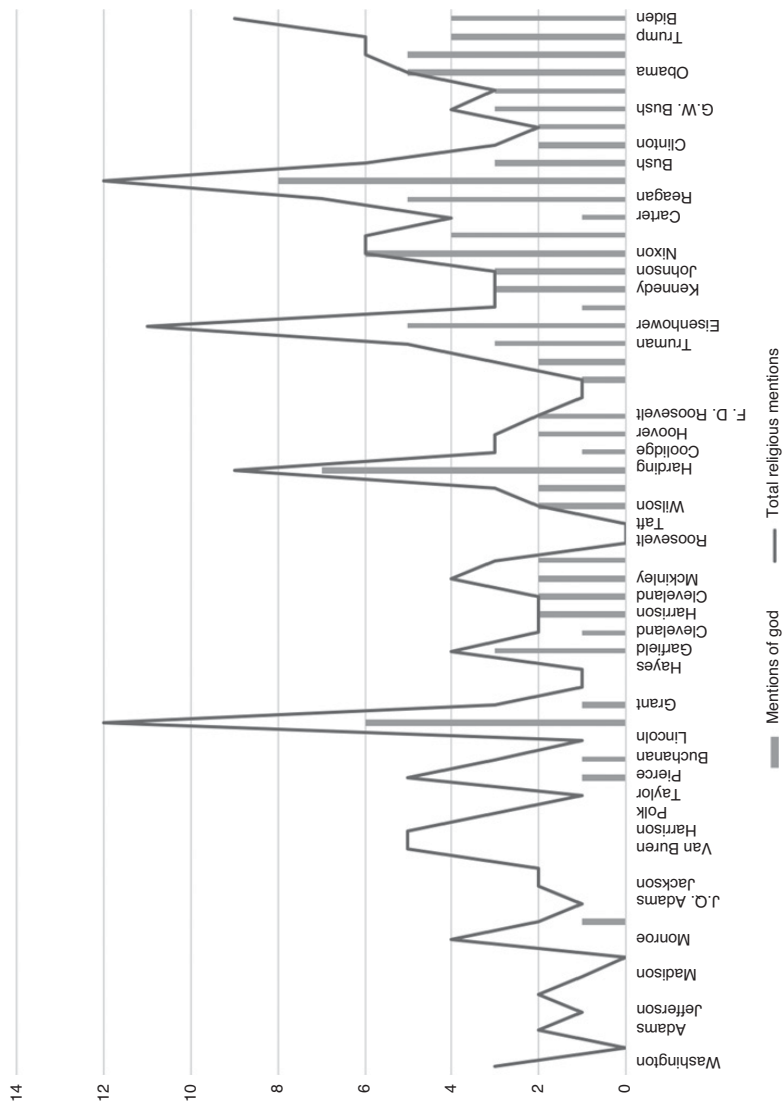


FIGURE 1.2 Frequency of the use of God and other religious language in presidential inaugural addresses
 Source: *The American Presidency Project* (www.presidency.ucsb.edu/index.php) (Peters and Woolley 2017)

exceptionalism was used as a call to action. In his 1942 State of the Union Address, a month after the Pearl Harbor attacks, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt invoked a divine imperative when he stated: “The world is too small to provide adequate ‘living room’ for both Hitler and God.”⁹ He warned failure would cause the Nazis to impose their own “pagan” religion on the world, and the Bible and Cross would be replaced with *Mein Kampf* and the swastika. After the war effort, the expansion of “godless” communism in Eastern Europe and Asia demanded a national religious revival in response (Wuthnow 1988; Wald 1994; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Church attendance grew rapidly as religious and national teachings coincided. In 1954, Presbyterian minister George MacPherson Docherty, who drove the addition of “under God” to the US Pledge of Allegiance, stated that “an atheistic American is a contradiction in terms” (quoted in Bates 2004, p. 29). Religious leaders worked to establish a biblical justification for free market systems and a strong military. Evangelist Billy Graham, a fervent anti-communist hawk, thundered about communism:

[It] has decided against God, against Christ, against the Bible, and against all religion. Communism is not only an economic interpretation of life – Communism is a religion that is inspired, directed and motivated by the Devil himself who has declared war against Almighty God. (1988, pp. 54–55)

Senior government officials agreed. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover encouraged parents to fight communism by sending their children to church (Bates 2004). In a briefing to newspaper editors, President Eisenhower shared his “unshakeable belief that it is only through religion that we can lick this thing called communism” (New York Times 1953). The US Congress instituted a National Day of Prayer to emphasize the nation’s connection to the divine (Wuthnow 1988; Wald 1994; Bates 2004; Prothero 2012). In response to the continuing Cold War, and to growing racial and social justice movements in the United States, religious leaders such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell extolled the need for Americans to remain religiously and politically vigilant. President Reagan’s famous 1983 “Evil Empire” speech was made to the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals. In it, Reagan exemplifies the intermingling of nation, religion, and foreign policy during this time:

While America’s military strength is important, let me add here that I’ve always maintained that the struggle now going on for the world will never be decided by bombs or rockets, by armies or military might. The real crisis we face today is a spiritual one; at root, it is a test of moral will and faith.¹⁰

With the fall of communism, religious exceptionalism's foreign policy influence appeared set to wane. However, the events of September 11, 2001, changed this trajectory. The Bush Doctrine, which underpinned America's formal response to the terror acts, proclaimed the renewed role of the nation as the world's divinely appointed savior (Bacevich and Prodromou 2004; McCartney 2004; Monten 2005). As a policy arguing that the best way to sustain national security was to expand US influence, it fit with earlier expansionary themes in American history, such as *Manifest Destiny* and America's dominance of the Pacific (Green 2017). The overtly moralistic tone of the Bush Doctrine demonstrated the renewed value of religion in foreign policy decisions. By framing the War on Terror as a war between good and evil, President Bush invoked religious imagery to convince the public that his plan was noble and divinely inspired (McCartney 2004; Maoz and Henderson 2020).

The religious zeal underpinning the Bush administration's prosecution of the War on Terror was evident in the rhetoric and actions of members and supporters of the administration. General William Boykin, at the time serving as Deputy Undersecretary for Defense Intelligence, repeatedly framed this as a battle between American and Satan (Cooper 2003). In 2009, reports surfaced that in the early years of the war effort, military briefings included cover pages with biblical passages and images (Sanger 2009). In early 2010, it was reported that a military arms supplier was inscribing biblical references on rifle sights (Eckholm 2010).¹¹ Bob Woodward's account of President Bush's decision-making provides an understanding of how religious exceptionalism influenced the president in developing his course of action. Woodward notes how Bush's faith directed his policy agenda and that he truly felt that the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan were part of a great divine purpose. Thus compelled, there was no need for multilateral legitimation of American action (2004). Many within the administration subscribed to the belief that once other nations saw that the United States was on the side of good and that good would prevail, they would join the fight – a coalition of the willing, inspired to battle evil by the City on the Hill (Monten 2005).

1.6 REBUTTALS TO AMERICAN RELIGIOUS EXCEPTIONALISM

The narrative of American religious exceptionalism as a line through American intellectual history and policy-thinking is not without its challengers. As with any mythology, there are those who refute it or want to replace it with another. Many are skeptical of the sincerity of the

messianic narrative of American foreign policy, which they describe as a rhetorical technique advanced by nonreligious neoconservatives (Bacevich and Prodromou 2004). Critics, such as Gregory Boyd (2005), challenge the Christian nation myth, citing the first sentence from Article 11 of the Treaty of Tripoli as *prima facie* evidence:

As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion, as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Musselmen (*sic*), and as the said States never have entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mehomitan (*sic*) nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries. (Miller 1931, p. 365)

Critics also emphasize that there is no mention of God in the Constitution, and that any mention of religion limits government intervention, thus allowing people to be religious or nonreligious. To some, the very existence of the First Amendment confirms America's credentials as a secular nation (Hughes 2004). Such skeptics are joined by religious scholars and leaders in their rejection of the tenets of American religious exceptionalism. During the Cold War, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr cautioned against myths envisioning the nation as God's chosen because they promote false understandings of the world and had the potential to generate great harm to humanity (Niebuhr 2008). More recently, progressive Christians such as Jim Wallis have vociferously criticized the connections between religious groups and American nationalism, often referring to this connection as a form of idolatry (Wallis 2019).

Some of the harshest critiques of American religious exceptionalism have come from those discussing the lives of marginalized groups. They argue that a nation inspired by God would not commit atrocities, such as slavery and decimation of the Native American population (Hughes 2004; Boyd 2005). As Wilson Moses points out, Blacks have accepted the idea of a divine connection to the nation and have used it to issue jeremiads of their own that criticize and demand change of the nation's actions (1982). In 1829, David Walker condemned the nation to divine punishment for allowing slavery and the mistreatment of Blacks (Walker 1995). Following Walker's path, Maria Stewart compared the United States to Babylon because it was "a seller of slaves and the souls of men." She continues:

I believe that the oppression of injured Africa has come up before the Majesty of Heaven; and when our cries have reached the ears of the Most High, it will be a tremendous day for the people of this land; for strong is the arm of the Lord God Almighty. (2001, p. 127)

In his 1968 address at the National Cathedral, Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. offered his own jeremiad against his nation's failure to protect those with the greatest need:¹²

One day we will have to stand before the God of history and we will talk in terms of things we have done. Yes, we will be able to say we built gargantuan bridges to span the seas, we built gigantic buildings to kiss the skies. Yes, we made our submarines to penetrate oceanic depths. We brought into being many other things with our scientific and technological power.

It seems that I can hear the God of history saying, "That was not enough! But I was hungry, and ye fed me not. I was naked, and ye clothed me not. I was devoid of a decent sanitary house to live in, and ye provided no shelter for me. And consequently, you cannot enter the kingdom of greatness. If ye do it unto the least of these, my brethren, ye do it unto me." That's the question facing America today.

He continues his last Sunday sermon by directly invoking the image of an ever present and judgmental deity as he offers his critique of the war in Vietnam:¹³

The judgment of God is upon us today. And we could go right down the line and see that something must be done – and something must be done quickly. We have alienated ourselves from other nations so we end up morally and politically isolated in the world. There is not a single major ally of the United States of America that would dare send a troop to Vietnam, and so the only friends that we have now are a few client-nations like Taiwan, Thailand, South Korea, and a few others.

Forty years later, during the 2008 Democratic primaries, Rev. Jeremiah Wright shocked White America with his fiery condemnation of the nation's foreign and domestic policy, which ended in a call for divine retribution against America (McKenzie 2011). As we have sought to make clear in this chapter, far from being un-American as his critics accused him, Wright's language could not have been more squarely in the American rhetorical tradition.

1.7 CONCLUSION

Even with its critics, the myth of American religious exceptionalism has shaped and animated the nation's consciousness. While often used as a tool by elites to achieve political outcomes, America's unique religious brand of nationalism reflects an ideology steeped in an enduring history of embedding a divine mission into national myths. In this manner, American religious exceptionalism has played an important role in shaping the psychology of Americans and subsequently directed their attitudes about what the nation is, what it is not, and how it ought to behave. Nor is

this myth of American religious exceptionalism the stuff of yore; it is as prevalent today as ever, and will continue to influence attitudes and behaviors for many decades to come. We will seek to convince that contemporary Americans' attitudes and behaviors are well explained by the politicization of a commonplace ideology of American religious exceptionalism that has guided American public opinion since the country's formation. The remainder of this book explicates who adheres to this myth and how these adherents think about what it means to be an American and therefore who can be an American, and what this understanding means for how the nation should interact with the rest of the world.