

Identity matters. Reflections on the “Israelite matrices” of American identity

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Introduction

In 1819, the leaders of the anti-Federalist party, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe, were driven by a profound aspiration and moral commitment to establish the University of Virginia. In December of the same year, Jefferson, the “Monticello’s wise”, conveyed to W. Roscoe his vision of an institution that would be established «based on the illimitable freedom of thought»¹ and that this great achievement would then extend to the entire Nation. This aspiration was borne out by the University of Charlottesville, which was the first institution in the US to establish a clear separation between higher education and religious doctrine²: indeed, for many decades, it was the only such institution. A staunch deist, Jefferson believed that the «professorship of theology should have no place in our institution»³. It would be necessary to await the conclusion of the Civil War and the lengthy period of Republican hegemony in the latter half of the 19th century before these ideals could be also disseminated to the New England universities, the so-called “nine colonial colleges.” These institutions were founded upon the legacy of the preachers and theologians of the pre-

¹ «Thomas Jefferson to William Roscoe, 27 December 1820», Founders Online, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-16-02-0404>.

² J.J. Ellis, *American sphinx: the character of Thomas Jefferson*, Knopf, New York 1997, p. XXV.

³ «Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Cooper, 7 October 1814», Founders Online, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-08-02-0007>.

vious century and were characterized by a profound religious fervour in their teachings.

The contemporary allows for the observation of events that appear to be pivotal in the understanding of the characteristics of the United States of America: among these events there are the pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel protests that are occurring on American university campuses. These events serve to highlight two key points. Firstly, the unrestricted freedom of thought that Jefferson advocated for has not been achieved either in the university or the nation. Secondly, even two centuries later, the proselytist and religious dimension continue to exert an influence on the so-called "high culture" (university students and academia), as well as on American "low culture" – and it is evident that this distinction is not always straightforward and clear.

It is reasonable to question whether the vehement and perhaps disproportionate response to the protests – there have been over 2.000 arrests at various universities and numerous incidents of violence in other context⁴ – is not driven by factors other than the defence of the foreign policy positions of the current administration. Since October 7, it has become evident that support for Israel is a foundational assumption of foreign policy, which involves International Relations studies. However, this unwavering support and solidarity also appears to be a significant factor among common citizens, as evidenced by the strong reaction against those who oppose Israel (including Jews)⁵. The fundamental question, therefore, is "why?"

This text sets out to provide an answer to the question posed by reflecting on the origins of the concepts of "Americanism and the People" that inform American culture and political identity. Following the lead of recent approaches in political science that focus on the discus-

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/live/2024/may/01/university-protests-pro-palestinian-demonstrators-arrested-latest-news>.

⁵ C. Von Quednow, E. Levenson, *Pro-Palestinian protest outside LA synagogue criticized as 'antisemitic' after street fights with pro-Israel protesters*, «CNN US», 24-06-2024: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/24/us/los-angeles-synagogue-palestinian-israeli-protest-violence/index.html>; N. Sauer, *For many American Jews protesting for Palestinians, activism is a journey rooted in their Jewish values*, «The Conversation», 21-05-2024: [For many American Jews protesting for Palestinians, activism is a journey rooted in their Jewish values \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/for-many-american-jews-protesting-for-palestinians-activism-is-a-journey-rooted-in-their-jewish-values).

sive dimension as a fundamental element in identity formation⁶, considering culture as a semiotic context⁷ and focus on certain elements of the discourse of 18th-century pastors and theologians. The continuing relevance of the Awakenings linked to the “Great Awakening” tradition of the 18th century is emphasised, with particular focus on the origin of the use of Old Testament themes and the consequent “symbolic-symbiotic” link between American and Israelite identity. Furthermore, this contribution demonstrates how the affirmation of these elements, now regarded as hallmarks of the concept of “Americanism”, was the outcome of a discursive and doctrinaire clash between the Southern and Northern colonies prior to Independence, and how these elements influenced subsequent political developments.

The “Awakenings”: navigating the intersection of faith and politics

In recent months, the Al-Jazeera broadcaster’s documentary *Praying for Armageddon*⁸ has generated considerable interest. The programme

⁶ D. Howarth, *Discourse*, McGraw-Hill Education, London 2000, chapter 6 and 7; M.V. Jørgensen, L.J. Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, Sage, London 2002, pp. 5-28; D. Howarth, *Applying discourse theory: The method of articulation*, in D. Howarth, J. Torfing (Ed.), *Discourse theory in European politics: Identity, policy and governance*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2005, pp. 316-349; R. Wodak, *The discourse of politics in action: Politics as usual*, Springer, London 2009; J. Glynos, D. Howarth, R. Flitcroft, C. Love, K. Roussos, J. Vazquez, *Logics, Discourse Theory and Methods: Advances, Challenges, and Ways Forward*, in «Journal of Language and Politics», 20(1)/2021, pp. 62-78.

⁷ M. Kranert, *Discourse and political culture. The language of the Third Way in German and the UK*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam 2019, pp. 12-32; A. Pickel, *Cultures as semiotic systems: reconceptualizing culture in a systemic perspective*, in M.R. Matthews (Ed.), *Mario Bunge: A Centenary Festschrift*, Springer, London 2019, pp. 415-438; A. Pickel, *Nations, national cultures, and natural languages: A contribution to the sociology of nations*, in «Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour», 43(4)/2013, pp. 425-445. See also, R. Posner, *Was ist Kultur? Zur semiotischen Explikation anthropologischer Grundbegriffe*, in M. Landsch, H. Karnowski, I. Bystřina (Eds.), *Kultur, Evolution: Fallstudien und Synthese*, Lang, Frankfurt 1992, pp. 1-65.

⁸ «*Praying for Armageddon. Why evangelicals influence US foreign policy in the Middle East*»: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhT7oyDIBIk&t=1767s>.

focuses on the rallies and beliefs of evangelical sects and churches, which are regarded as a significant pressure group in foreign policy and a pivotal component in the United States. Far beyond the institutional lobbying, that is well documented in the literature⁹, the documentary focuses on the particularities and work of evangelical churches and associations in strengthening the link between the destinies of the American nation and Israel. One of the main protagonists is Pastor G. Burd, leader of the M-25 mission: the name of his community comes from a few verses in Book 25 of the Gospel of Matthew¹⁰. Burd and his followers, reminiscent of Hell's Angels in their aesthetics and Knights Templar in their fervour, ride their Harley-Davidson motorbikes around the United States performing charity work and proselytising in large-scale events called "Awakenings". The name "Awakenings" is loaded with meaning for American identity and political culture, as the "Great Awakening" of the 18th century can be considered a fundamental event in the birth of politics and the United States. In his orations, Burd proclaims the fulfilment of the prophecies of the "Book of Revelations", baptizes new adepts, and consecrates them knights with an oath on the knees and sword. Burd and the evangelicals posit a correlation between the Second Coming of Christ (this time in the US) and the conquest of Jerusalem by the Jewish state. They also assert that they are actively engaged in efforts to bring about the fulfilment of the "seven years of tribulation" that will culminate in a final confrontation between the forces of good (the Christian US and Israel) and those of evil. It is possible to perceive this outcome as somewhat predictable, given the extensive body of literature on the role of religion in US politics and the ideological foundation underlying US politics and nationalism. The outcome of these studies is, in almost all cases, the identification of a national ideology characterised

⁹ A.R. Schaefer, *Evangelical global engagement and the American State after World War II*, in «Journal of American Studies», 51(4)/2017, pp. 1069-1094; M. McAlister, *American evangelicals, the changing global religious environment, and foreign policy activism*, in «The Review of Faith & International Affairs», 17(2)/2019, pp. 1-12.

¹⁰ «I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger, and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you cured me, I was in prison and you came to visit me» Matthew 25:42-44.

by the «enduring and dominant belief that we have a mission in the world and must make a unique contribution to history»¹¹.

In the aftermath of September 11, K. Minogue revisited one of his seminal works from the 1960s, elucidating the schism between American nationalism, defined by the absence of a cult of the strong state, and European nationalism¹². Beyond the comparisons that have engaged the attention of political scientists for almost a century, it is crucial to elucidate the genesis and the historical moment at which this distinctive political culture first emerged. However, there is no consensus regarding the initial period during which this worldview and the associated ideas about the nation and its constituents first took shape. The work of C. van Tyne and his heirs contributed to the dissolution of the link between the War of Independence and the establishment of American national identity. According to the historian, the «spirit of '76 was characterised by an average level of enthusiasm for independence, loyalty to a great commander, hatred of George III, but certainly not by love of country or a great ideal, or a cause more precious than life itself»¹³: patriotism is not a spontaneous phenomenon, but rather a gradual process of maturation. R. Bellah, however, suggested that independence was likely “mentally” achieved in the latter half of the eighteenth century, preceding the emergence of the concept of a nation with universal authority. During this period, colonists «developed a self-consciousness (*as Americans*), yet did not imagine an American nation»¹⁴: this may be regarded as an anomalous case in which a political identity is not only established prior to the formation of a state to embody it, but also in the absence of such an entity.

¹¹ E.L. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The idea of America's millennial role*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, London 1968, p. 164.

¹² K. Minogue, *Managing Nationalism*, in «New Left Review», 23/2003, pp. 95-99; K. Minogue, *Nationalism*, Basic Books, New York 1967.

¹³ C. Van Tyne, *The American Revolution: 1776-1783*, Harper, New York 1905, p. 113.

¹⁴ R.N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart, With New Preface: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, University of California Press, Oakland 2007, p. 9; italics by the author.

An historian interested in American political culture and identity such as R. Kelley, has traced the formation of a particular national identity distinct from nationalism. This «embodied ideology», as his mentor R. Hofstadter called it in *The Paranoid Style*¹⁵, is linked to the uniqueness of a chosen people and to another awakening, the so-called “Great Awakening”, inaugurated in the 1730s, represents a movement of ethical conscience-building with markedly pietistic overtones and fraught with political consequences. For almost 200 years, according to Kelley, American political culture would move around discourses that gathered a limited number of arguments in an attempt to appropriate this narrative¹⁶. In a collective work from the early 2000s, several French authors analysed these aspects in order to portray the United States as a country that is undergoing a process of secularisation¹⁷. Furthermore, from the metaphor of the “house on the hill” to Manifest Destiny, historiography and political sociology have frequently referred to the cumbersome legacy of the Puritan settlers’ conceptions. Of these, the “Great Awakening” is arguably the most significant manifestation¹⁸.

It is a misconception that the phenomenon of Awakenings (or Revivals) is an American phenomenon. In fact, such occurrences have

¹⁵ R. Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American politics*, Vintage, New York 2012, p. 32.

¹⁶ R. Kelley, *Ideology and Political Culture from Jefferson to Nixon*, in «The American Historical Review», 82(3)/ 1977, pp. 531-562; see also R. Beeman, S. Botwin, E.C. Carter, *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*, University of North Carolina press for the Omohundro institute of early American history and culture, Chapel Hill, London 1987.

¹⁷ J.G. Mason, *Una valutazione complessiva: il divario crescente. L'eccezionalismo americano. Il ritorno alle tradizioni premoderne*, in J. Liberman (a cura di), *Quale democrazia Americana?*, Jaca Book, Milano 2005, pp. 159-178.

¹⁸ See S.E. Ahlstrom, *Religion, revolution, and the rise of modern nationalism: Reflections on the American experience*, in «Church History», 44(4)/1975, pp. 492-504; C.L. Albanese, *Sons of the fathers: The civil religion of the American Revolution*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1976; T.H. Breen, *Ideology and nationalism on the eve of the American Revolution: Revisions once more in need of revising*, in «The Journal of American History», 84(1)/1997, pp. 13-39; B. Baylin, *To Begin the World Anew. The Genius and Ambiguities of the American Founders*, Knopf, New York 2003; D. Bradburn, *The citizenship revolution: Politics and the creation of the American union, 1774-1804*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville 2009.

been documented in Germany as early as the time of the Reformation. Moreover, the underlying religious behaviours that give rise to these awakenings can be traced back to 17th-century England and Scotland. Nevertheless, as their continued existence demonstrates, in the colonies of the new continent they rapidly became of paramount importance. The “Great Awakening” was presented as an original “public-political display of religious ethics” and subsequently nationalised. This was due to the large popular following it enjoyed. In the mid-1700s in the United States, the influence of religion extended beyond the confines of churches and into the political sphere. Pulpits were erected in a multitude of locations, including city streets, bars, printing houses, and even in the countryside and remote areas. The preachers became renowned figures, “entrepreneurs of religion”, who instigated that unquenchable religious fervour which, according to de Tocqueville, «can never die in America, because it is indissolubly linked to the idea of patriotism»¹⁹. During the “Great Awakening”, the connection between America and the idea of its “unique and exceptional destiny”, the connection between a space and a divine project, became evident.

It is through the orations of these preachers that we can ascertain a prevailing belief that the orations disseminated in the colonies, or what in the terms of the discursive approach of van Dijk is defined as “cultural common ground”²⁰, and basis for political ideologies. In his works, Van Dijk posits that ideologies can be identified within the «conceptual and disciplinary triangle linking cognition, society, and discourse»²¹: in every system there are different ideologies in the same space, which must be distinguished from a common ground, i.e. the cultural knowledge system. Group beliefs are analogous to cultural beliefs, but on a smaller scale, as they are shared only by a specific group: frequently comprise modified cultural beliefs, such as a less rigid or more rigid approach, or simply different interpretations of truth

¹⁹ A. De Tocqueville, *La Democrazia in America*, Rizzoli, Milano 2012, p. 66.

²⁰ T.A. van Dijk, *Society and Discourse: How Social Contexts Influence Text and Talk*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008.

²¹ T.A. van Dijk, *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, SAGE, London 1988, p. 5.

or criteria. Ideologies are the foundation for these socially shared beliefs of a group and play a role at the social level. They control or organise the knowledge and interpretations of the groups, which are important for the interaction, coordination and reproduction of the group itself, the reproduction of power and domination within and between groups and provide legitimacy. Recently, to address identity formation in a historical process, others author like Gee proposes to distinguish a semiotic system between "little discourse" (d) and "big Discourse" (D): the first one (little "d") is defined as language in context, while the second "Discourse" (big "D") is the knowledge system²². The following references are intended to illustrate the various approaches to discourse analysis and their enduring influence on the formation of collective identity over time.

In the next section of this text, I will focus just on the origin, formation and discourse elements of a part of the American political knowledge system. A discursive approach from a historical perspective should reconstruct the evolution of the mechanisms of predication, naming, perspectivisation and the argumentative structures (*topoi*) that have been used in various messages in various media over time. This should be done by adding a triangulation approach involving the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres, and discourses and all the extralinguistic social variables, institutional frameworks, and the broader sociopolitical and historical context in which discursive practices are embedded and related²³. The objective of this work is not to achieve these results; therefore, our considerations are limited and related to a pre-existing multidisciplinary literature that has demonstrated the persistence of religious elements in American politics, identity, and other domains,

²² J.P. Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*, Routledge, New York, London 2005, pp. 7-11.

²³ See M. Reisigl, R. Wodak, *The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)*, in R. Wodak, M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, (23-61) Sage, London 2015, pp. 23-61; R. Wodak, *Critical discourse analysis, discourse-historical approach (DHA)*, in K. Tracy (Ed.) *The international encyclopaedia of language and social interaction*, John Wiley & Sons, New York 2015, pp. 1-14, pp. 4-7.

including mass media, since the advent of the penny press in the nineteenth century to contemporary²⁴.

The Old Testament in Politics

This section examines the protagonists and the discursive elements surrounding the inclusion of specific elements of the Old Testament in the formation of American identity, particularly in the context of the "Great Awakening". A brief classification list of three main elements is proposed, with an emphasis on how the creation and influence of the college system helped to exert significant control over the historical interpretation of these elements for several decades.

S. Stoddard (1643-1729) was the first pastor to initiate the Revival, paving the way for what would be known as "evangelical conversion theology". He was a theologian of considerable erudition, though inclined to a fatalistic outlook. According to his contemporaries, he was «renowned for his gifts and grace, and was blessed with extraordinary success in his ministry»²⁵ from the outset. It can be also attested that Stoddard was held in high regard by notable figures such as J. Winthrop, a prominent figure among colonial pastors, B. Franklin and others. His doctrine, compiled in a memoir titled *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (1737), has been a subject of considerable interest and discussion even in conservative think tanks from the Reagan presidency onwards²⁶. However, the most renowned entrepre-

²⁴ A. Briggs, P. Burke, D. Smith, J. Richards, S. Yeo, *What is the History of Popular Culture?*, in J. Gardiner (Ed.), *What is History Today... ?*, Palgrave, London 1988, pp. 120-130; H. Bergmann, *God in the Street: New York Writing from the Penny Press to Melville*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1995; R.J. Scholnick, *Extermination and Democracy: O'Sullivan, the Democratic Review, and Empire, 1837-1840*, in «American Periodicals», 15(2)/2005, pp. 123-141; S. Hawkins, *Settling the Pop Score: Pop Texts and Identity Politics*, Routledge, London 2002, pp. 56-62; R.J. Scholnick, *Extermination and Democracy: O'Sullivan, the Democratic Review, and Empire, 1837-1840*, cit., pp. 123-141.

²⁵ T.S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2007, p. 66.

²⁶ F. Tonello, *Il Nazionalismo Americano*, Liviana, Padova 2007, pp. 47-55, p. 145.

neur of the faith was undoubtedly the Stoddard nephew, J. Edwards (1703-1758). He was a preacher, pastor, theologian, and the architect of the (re)conceptualisation of seventeenth-century millennial themes. Furthermore, he was an advocate of religious action as a political instrument for the progress of history. His contribution to historiography is twofold: first, he inaugurated the historiographical hegemony of the Northeast, and, above all, he "extended" the original Puritan framework of identity and "Mission" from New England to the entire colonial system of English-speaking America (the New England doctrine). The result of this approach was so effective that Edwards' preaching about the people and the laws led a young T. Jefferson to liken the figure of the pastor to that of the Spartan legislator Lycurgus. As the future president of the United States of America have stated, the Edwards ministry would, in the years to come, allow «even this beloved land to look like a farm divided among many brothers»²⁷. Regarding the political implications of Edwards' work, an important element concerns inclusion and the characteristics of conversion²⁸. In the colonies, the Half-Way Covenant, adopted by the synods of 1657 and 1662, stipulated that baptism alone was the prerequisite for civil privileges of church membership, but not for participation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Stoddard, in a more liberal interpretation, argued that the Lord's Supper was a converting ordinance, and that baptism was a sufficient title to all the privileges of the church. In his argument, Edwards posited that the Lord's Supper is not the catalyst for regeneration. He further asserted that communicants should be professing Protestants, endowed with special grace, and that this grace is manifested in the immediate and supernatural divine illumination of the soul²⁹. By the late 1730s, religious fervour had reached a point of considerable concern. A considerable number of New Englanders had become involved in religious revivals. However, the outcome of this involvement was not the formation of convictions but rather a belief in damnation. It is notable that

²⁷ L.M. Bassani, *Il pensiero politico di Thomas Jefferson. Libertà, proprietà ed autogoverno*, Giuffrè, Milano 2002, p. 47.

²⁸ G.M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, Yale University Press, New Haven, London 2003.

²⁹ Ivi, pp. 156-157.

Edwards himself had observed that a significant number of individuals felt compelled (by Satan) to take their own lives. The evidence presented indicates that Edwards' message is evolving away from the traditional “fire and brimstone” style of preaching and towards a more nuanced approach that incorporates strong ethical values. In his writings, he sought to diminish the significance of the “bodily effects”, characterizing them as secondary to the true work of God. He gradually shifted towards a more philosophical and socio-political statement of “distinctive signs”³⁰. In the period preceding his demise, he published in Northampton in 1747 the treatise entitled *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth*. At the end of his life he was convinced that the new continent would usher in the renewal of the world, and believing the prophecy that the sun would “rise in the west to kiss the promised land of God's people”, Edwards managed not to dissolve the Puritan tradition but to transform the apocalyptic vision of the previous century into an ongoing millennium dominated by the moral and material resourcefulness of the individual. In his view, dreary customs and terror were to be abandoned in order to encounter the glory of God fulfilled in the promised land, but without abandoning the biblical setting and language. Leaving aside the retrospective celebrations of the American protagonists – the American Clergy, for example, was almost always cold to the Revolution and only became openly anti-English after Saratoga – the crucial portents of the work of ministers like Stoddard and Edwards, of figures like T.J. Frelinghuysen (1691-1747), G. Tennent (1703-1764) and G. Whitefield (1714-1770), concern the role of American political culture and identity, the idea of Americanism and democracy, and thus the conception of man, people and government that they bequeathed.

The dominance of these authors' visions was largely enabled by the pervasive influence of the historiographical tradition and the palingnetic narrative of the American people within academic institutions. Nevertheless, although often overlooked, even prior to the post-Civ-

³⁰ O.D. Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards among the theologians*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapid, Cambridge 2015, pp. 67-68.

il War resurgence, another tradition existed, with Protestant pastors in the South claiming their own narrative of America and its people. One is reminded of the myth of the "Old Three Hundreds", the parallelism between the patriarchs and the settlers as well as between Parades y Arrillaga and the Pharaoh, as well as its contribution to justifying the predestination of Texas and its people, which was asserted with great vigour before and during the 1846 war between Mexico and the United States. Even in the nineteenth century, this tradition was repeatedly evoked by one of South Carolina's most celebrated intellectuals and senators, J.C. Calhoun. In his speeches, Calhoun asserted that the Southern Federated States represented a unified and virtuous community (also to justify slavery), the only one that was fulfilling the Lord's mission. In contrast to the independent North, the South, according to Calhoun, had consistently sought justice rather than political independence, which was perceived as problematic and a potential source of discord³¹. This conception of the dangers of politics was also informed by a religious vision shaped during the Awakening era, though it differed significantly from Edwards's perspective. Unlike the Northern Puritanism that had opposed Congregationalism, and was more Presbyterian, this theology was different. C. Albanese has demonstrated that, by the end of the 18th century, South Carolina and Virginia were the states most receptive to the sermons of pastors such as J. Murray (1741-1814) and, in particular, E. Winchester (1751-1797). The latter, born near Brookline, had studied the so-called "hyper-Calvinist" thought of J. Gill with G. Whitefield and subsequently served in Boston. However, his doctrine underwent a significant transformation in the late 1770s, following his exposure to the ideas of the German mystic Paul Siegel (George Nicolai of Freissdorf) and his *The Everlasting Gospel* (1710). Upon his arrival in South Carolina, his reflections on the radical Reformation tradition became a defining element in American Christology³². In contrast to Edwards, Winchester's

³¹ R. Luraghi, *Storia della guerra civile americana*, Rizzoli, Milano 1994, p. 43; see J.C. Calhoun, *Speech on the Treaty, August, 1842*, in *The Works of John C. Calhoun*, (Vol. 4), Appleton, New York 1857.

³² C.L. Albanese, *A republic of mind and spirit: A cultural history of American metaphysical religion*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2007, pp. 152-153, p. 157.

preaching was characterised by a focus on the past, particularly the idea of a «final and decisive recapitulation of the human race by Christ as the second Adam»³³. This affirmation of the salvation of humanity for eternity, coupled with the necessity of perpetuating the Reformation, represented a significant departure from Edwards' teachings. The primary social consequence, at least until the end of the century, was that consistent with the tenets of the Germanic Hermetic tradition, future Southerners regarded the original Congregationalist synod as sacrosanct and, consequently, the election of England as God's chosen holy land as irrefutable³⁴. America, as evidenced by the political tradition later exemplified by Calhoun, was more an extension, an appendage, but not a qualitatively distinct land of Exodus.

The divergence of opinions between the New Englanders and those in the South, which was evident from the outset and continues to be a topic of discussion to this day, led to the New Englanders' role as moral guides in the political sphere. This role involved the importation and adaptation of biblical *topoi*, discourses, metaphors and metonyms to influence the prevailing conceptions in the South. This was done with the intention of promoting the values of independence and liberty. The conflict over the future of the American nation was, in essence, a doctrinal and discursive one. They advocated the re-actualisation of the Reformation, rather than the continuation proposed by Winchester and Murray, on the ideological basis of the English providentialism that had been established between 1620 and 1660. This involved encouraging the "interventionism" and emancipatory socio-political dimension that Edwards had championed. This rhetoric became the dominant cultural discourse that shaped the conceptual framework, the interpretative model of space and way of life. Political symbols and definitions «are not metaphors for power; they are the means and ends of power itself»³⁵ and these elements were comple-

³³ Ivi, p. 153.

³⁴ G.H. Williams, *American Universalism: A Bicentennial Historical Essay*, in «Journal of the Universalist Historical Society», 3(9)/1971, pp. 91-128.

³⁵ L. Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, St. Martin's Press, New York 1996, p. 54.

mented by the intermingling of providential and republican ideology that occurred with the Revolution³⁶.

It was necessary to identify several significant differences between the American colonies and Europe and England in order to disavow the vision of Winchester and others and claim American uniqueness. One of the key themes employed was the differentiation of the work of Puritanism from the other colonial enterprises of Catholic countries. It is well documented that the Spanish and Portuguese charged their victories against the pagan natives with a religious sense. However, it was only with the advent of Puritanism that the next step was taken: the sacralisation of intervention in physical space for the conquerors, rather than evangelisation of the conquered. Spain, above all, had justified its claims on the non-Christian lands and peoples of the New Continent by a sort of papal mandate: the "mission" to protect and evangelise the indigenous inhabitants in the name of the Church of Rome. England, in turn, confronted a comparable predicament. Since the beginning, despite lacking explicit authorization from Rome, it perceived itself as similarly invested with a "providential mission," conceived in terms of a conquest in the name of an ideal of moral civilization and the re-founding of the world³⁷. It is notable that in 1610, the pastor W. Crashaw delivered a sermon to the members of the Virginia Company, an English company authorised in 1606 by King James I to carry out settlements on the North American coast. In this sermon, he outlined a kind of national mission that would take place almost two centuries in advance. He stated that the English would take possession of the land and give to the indigenous peoples what they needed, namely «Christianity for their souls» and «civilisation for their land»³⁸. As executors of God's will, and not the mission of his Church, the project's essence was the conquest, settlement and making of the land fruitful for the benefit of the people. The occupation of the chosen people made the land sacred. In this context, refer-

³⁶ See T. Bonazzi, *La rivoluzione americana*, il Mulino, Bologna 1977.

³⁷ J.H. Elliott, *Imperi dell'Atlantico. America britannica e America spagnola, 1492-1830*, Einaudi, Torino 2010, p. 9.

³⁸ A. Brown, *The Genesis of the United States*, Russel & Russel, New York 1966, p. 19.

ences to conversion were quickly superseded by references to the Old Testament and the self-referentiality of the narrative of a chosen people who were not to convert, but to fulfil a mission in their ascetic isolation. This resulted in the overlap between the “visible saints” who landed in Plymouth and the Israelites. A. Stephanson has, in fact, defined American political culture as being primarily oriented around the value triad of the concepts of Election, Apostasy and Prophecy³⁹.

Consequently, the re-proposition of the biblical Exodus, the juxtaposition of the sea voyage with the wandering in the desert, became a constant element of comparison, a key to claiming a powerful theology of election and the keystone of the conception of self that would later inform American identity and culture. The United States was conceived as a sacred place for the fulfilment of the divine will and its corresponding secular idea of a liberated nation. This served to free the nation from the continental currents that, like Winchester and Murray, still saw England as the land of election. This “heresy”, which E. Gibbon attempted to eradicate in the years preceding the War of Independence, was subsequently also vindicated by the Reverend T. Brockaway, who proposed, despite the victory and the Peace of Paris, that knowledge, glory and religion must travel even further westward, because «there God is setting the stage from which he will display the wonders of his world and his people»⁴⁰. The messianic ideology that is often referenced did not serve to validate the claims of self-government that the colonial communes advanced (and which the British Crown conceded without significant hesitation). Instead, it constituted the very essence and, in conjunction with religious endorsement, the ultimate expression of the values of belonging that can help elucidate the support for other “chosen Peoples.”

The concept of Americanism, as it emerged from the North, was therefore fundamentally rooted in the Old Testament and Israelite idea of the Divine Election. In their re-discovery of the sacred scriptures, they inherited the theme of the divine choice of people and cov-

³⁹ A. Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*, Hill & Wang, New York 1996, p. 28-44.

⁴⁰ C.L. Albanese, *Sons of the fathers: The civil religion of the American Revolution*, cit., p. 36.

enant. In return for this choice, the unified people, who are unable to accept differences that would taint their purity, accept the covenant, that is, they choose it, they "elect" it. If they respect either God or their status as chosen ones, He will lead them to an abundant and enemy-free corner of the earth, initiating regeneration. It is therefore evident that territory, physical space and the journey are the fundamental symbolic elements. The march in the desert and the subsequent sea journey westward, as well as the conquest of the holy city, are the elements that reveal the redemption and reconciliation that are at the heart of this narrative. The conquest of this land of plenty, destined for them, is not an end in itself. It is through the taking of Jerusalem (new or old) that divine justice will regenerate the world by bringing reconciliation to completion. The identity of the new chosen people, as of the old, is limited to this characteristic: absolute loyalty to the plan and commitment of every man to the divine mission are the only conditions required. It is evident that, due to the fallibility of humankind, this is not a foregone conclusion. The covenant can be breached by the people, who are subject to severe penalties for this. One of Reverend Smith's principal themes during the period of the "Great Awakening" was the reference to the mysticism of the Kabbalah and the narrative of the "breaking of the vessels". Smith believed that America had collected the pieces of light scattered around the world, re-proposing what Brooke, appropriating a characteristic that Yahweh gives of the Israelites, calls a "prepared people", now rebuilt by the Atlantic⁴¹. The history of humanity has not been characterised by a lack of preparation for reconciliation, given the long periods of apostasy and errors in the choice between good and evil. The Jews, by rejecting the Gospel, failed to recognise the path marked out by God, which enabled the early Christians to prosper until they were later corrupted by Papism. It was therefore of the utmost importance to identify the genuine word of the Lord amidst the plethora of historical misinformation. With an almost rabbinic approach, a Puritan mastered the Bible. It can be, finally, argued that no other book has enjoyed greater fame than the Apocalypse, which in the Anglican Bible, as promoted

⁴¹ E.A. Robinson, *American universalism: its origins, organization and heritage*, Exposition Press, New York 1970, pp. 126-129.

by King James, took the name of the “Book of Revelations”. Furthermore, it posited a comprehensive and finite understanding of history, encompassing a first battle, a fleeting triumph of the Lord, and, at the conclusion of the “millennium”, a second battle with a decisive victory and triumph of good, the return of the Messiah to Earth, the ascension and divine judgement of the righteous and the wicked. The millennium was the final epoch before the end of time, or, as J. Milton poetically and not surprisingly described it, a “perpetual Shabbat”. The Puritans, for their part, interpreted the conquest of their land and then of Jerusalem as a stepping stone to Armageddon. This is similar to the argument put forth by contemporary evangelicals, who believe that the conquest of Jerusalem by the Israelis is necessary and marks the beginning of the final battle.

Conclusions: the risk of the American identity

I commenced my reflection on this argument with a discussion of contemporary events, including the unconditional support for Israel by many American Christians, their acts of violence against Jews who participated in pro-Palestine protests in colleges, and the role of evangelists and the documentary recounting their growing influence. It is now possible to draw lines of connection, a *fil rouge*, between these observations and the events currently taking place.

Firstly, it is important to underline that universities were a significant conduit for the dissemination of American religiosity and the subsequent political outlook. This is because, unlike in Europe, there was no clear distinction between high and popular culture in the United States during the 19th century. J.Q. Adams, for instance, highlighted this in his writings for the “American Whig Review”⁴². The preaching that took place from the pulpits or directly in the street (as in the case of Whitefield) is regarded as the genesis of American culture. Furthermore, the universities, their birth, development and the religious afflatus that still characterises them today, as mentioned in the

⁴² M. Schudson, *Discover the News: a social history of American Newspapers*, Basic Book, New York 1978, p. 52.

introduction, provide a useful proof of this. Higher education in the US is, in fact, inextricably linked to a religious outlook precisely because it was born out of the direct influence of the Awakening. W. Tennent's Log College would subsequently become Princeton University under the direction of his son and heir, G. Tennent. Edwards himself was president of Princeton University from 1758, becoming renowned for his weekly essay assignments in theology to the senior class. Also, in the 1730s-50s, on the initiative of pastors and on the basis of their preaching, a number of educational establishments, including Dartmouth, Brown University and Rutgers University, were established. In 1743, Franklin had a preaching hall built in Philadelphia for Whitefield predications. This hall would later become the University of Pennsylvania. Another clergyman, Reverend Peters, the author of the new "Book of Common Prayer", published in the same year as the Constitution, and rector of Christ Church, a fundamental institution for the spread of the Episcopal Church in the United States, was called to direct it.

In revivals depicted in the Al-Jazeera documentary, it is useful to refer to Pastor J. Hagee, the founder of Christians United for Israel (CUFI), and a descendant of a lineage of preachers dating back to the 1700s. At the rallies, he proceeds to discuss the Bible as an epistemic and political code, demonstrating the continued necessity of such a capacity for every true American (of which he claims to be the spokesman). The assertion that all things are a realisation or re-actualisation of the Bible is, after all, what the colonists were at pains to affirm in their constitutions. The initial legislation enacted by the colonists was, in fact, inspired by the principles of faith and based on the penal legislation of Connecticut, which included lengthy textual quotations from Deuteronomy, Exodus, and Leviticus. As de Tocqueville wrote:

They persistently penetrated the domain of conscience, and there were no sins that were not subject to the censure of the magistrate. In their ardour to impose their religious beliefs on others, they disregarded the fundamental principles of religious liberty. Those who wished to worship God in a manner different from that prescribed by the state were compelled to attend divine service and, in some cases, were punished with the whip or even death. Consequently, capital

punishment was a more frequent occurrence in the laws and was applied to those who were less culpable⁴³.

The documentary also depicts the thousands of ecstatic worshippers attending revivals (which are no longer held in the streets but in luxurious convention halls). In these instances, J. Hagee once more foretells the time of the final battle, he reiterates the indivisible bond between the Jewish and American people and the sacred mission entrusted to the latter by the Lord⁴⁴. In this manner, he draws attention to a parallel that he is aware it will resonate with many Americans and which, in fact, is asserted. Similarly, when Colorado Congresswoman L. Boebert articulates comparable beliefs, namely that «there are only two nations created for the purpose of glorifying the Lord, Israel and the United States of America: I bless, honour and serve them both»; or when Pastor R. Jeffres, head of the First Church of Dallas, the renowned figurehead of the Trinity Broadcasting Network and Trump's spiritual counsellor, extols the holiness of the two distinguished chosen peoples, the objective remains consistent. The centrality of the concept of the Chosen People in American political culture means that many Americans feel compelled to take sides in favour of the other Chosen People. To do otherwise would be to risk covenant, apostasy and the loss of a significant element of American political culture. Defending Israel today is similar to defend the nation. Those who oppose those who do not support the nation's creed, as de Tocqueville called the "empire of the majority", and occupy an institution as tied to that history as the universities are, have a duty-bound to do so, since, as Cmiel specified, to say anything that questions the nature of the country and the mission «is not just bad politics: it is un-American»⁴⁵. There is a certain parallel between the situation in Israel and the United States: in both countries there is a perception that they have a divine duty to recapture Jerusalem. This perception has led to

⁴³ A. De Tocqueville, *La Democrazia in America*, cit., pp. 59-60.

⁴⁴ A. Gabbatt, *This war is prophetically significant: why US evangelical Christian's support Israel*, «The Guardian», 30-10-2023.

⁴⁵ K. Cmiel, *Democrat eloquence: The fight over popular speech in nineteenth-century America*, University of California Press, Oakland 1991, p. 28.

a certain degree of aggression from US citizens, even towards Orthodox Jews who have sided with the ceasefire, in the absence of any condemnation of Israel.

American nationalism and the claimed symbiosis with the Jews also provide an explanation for the practices and actions of some of the more than 200.000 soldiers who have been baptised into the Army today. The documentary illustrates examples of rifle sights marked with passages from the "Book of Revelations" or the Exodus, and air force units transporting nuclear devices whose logos recall the effigy of the Crusaders, the Star of David and the Temple of Solomon. Furthermore, according to former Colonel Larry Wilkerson, this now majority and indispensable component of the army also engages in tireless propaganda work in society. This is achieved through the creation of a support network for soldiers' families, training camps for the children of those abroad, prayer groups, recreational activities and alternative education systems. This constitutes a kind of army within an army that then constitutes a state within a state. For these soldiers, as well as for tens and tens of millions of other Americans, the defence of Israel is much more than a matter of foreign policy decided by a department in Washington. It is an ideological issue that has to do with the very identity and destiny of the United States and its people. As some interviewees have stated, "supporting Israel is America's destiny". It is evident that commentators and numerous scholars fail to comprehend that the subject under discussion is not limited to foreign policy and strategic goals. Rather, it concerns the identity of the United States, the nature of its mission, and the symbiotic bond between chosen peoples. In the first century of American history, this sacred vision was transposed into the political ideal of the state and the first and only modern democracy for the majority of citizens. This is analogous to the contemporary insistence on Israel being the first and only democracy in the Middle East.

It is important to recognise that collective identities and peoples are complex subjects, akin to prisms with many faces. Any historical-political study should take the Enlightenment into account, even "pagan"⁴⁶ matrices of the Founding Fathers' thought and work, as

⁴⁶ See L.L. Pellicani, *Le radici pagane dell'Europa*, Rubbettino, Soveria-Mannelli 2007.

well as the “neo-Roman” and Montesquieu thought of American republicanism⁴⁷. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the different conceptions of freedom held by the Founding Fathers, which can be traced back to Whig radicalism (and the tradition stemming from Cato’s Letters) and the proto-libertarian conceptions of Anglo-Saxon constitutionalism, the Federalist Papers, and the proto-populism of the Jeffersonians type of autonomous farmers⁴⁸. The objective of this text is not to make claims about the history of political thought. Rather, it attempts to apply the theory in question to contemporary events, thus “politicising” it. It is also possible to argue that the simplicity and immediacy of these Old Testament assumptions, the exaltation of a people as a totality descended from the signing of a Divine Covenant, thus claiming an ancestral and unquestionable legitimacy, were necessary because they have easier and more useful to include, at least ideally, large masses of citizens in the management of power and above all in the idea of a manifest and common destiny of the Republic. In a certain sense, if compared to the complexity of all the other references, it proved to be a “forced choice” for the US.

However, as Liberman et al. observed two decades ago in reference to another conflict in the Middle East, the potential risks associated with a close association with a historical legacy that has been sanctified over an even more distant past are considerable. Rather than questioning these assumptions, the answer lies in worshipping and invoking them more and more, as is well demonstrated by the radicalisation of evangelists and by the US public debate. Furthermore, there is a strong demand that political representatives should adopt a similar approach, as Trump campaigns exemplified. However, this will not actually resolve the issues and may, in fact, exacerbate them, both in foreign and domestic policy. Consequently, citizens will be further ex-

⁴⁷ See J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1975; E.L. McKittrick, S.M. Elkins, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1995; T. Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman 2003.

⁴⁸ M. Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American history*, Cornell University Press, New York 2017.

asperated. This also gives rise to the idea that if the republic is to decline further, it will undoubtedly be because there is a group of enemies who are attempting to thwart the efforts of a virtuous people who are striving for conciliation. Consequently, «instead of thinking to innovate, Americans rely on their patriarchs, their founding fathers to think for them by taking refuge in the pre-modern past»⁴⁹, a vicious cycle from which there is no escape, and which risks becoming an example of self-fulfilling prophecy, in a manner similar to the evangelist groups that “Pray for Armageddon”.

⁴⁹ D. Lazare, *Due Secoli di semi-immobilismo. La Paranoia Costituzionale contro la Sovranità Popolare*, in J. Liberman, *Quale Democrazia Americana?*, cit., pp. 45-58.