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Innerworldly Asceticism and American Foreign Policy: A Review Essay

Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role. By Ernest L. Tuveson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968. Pp. 238. \$10.00 (cloth); \$3.25 (paper).

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Max Weber wrote *The Protestant Ethic* a decade before he stated his general argument concerning the role of religion in social change. While many are familiar with the earlier thesis and its ensuing controversy, fewer recognize that the thesis concerning the Protestant Ethic is properly seen as an *illustration* of a more encompassing view of religion and social change. Briefly put, the larger proposition states that widespread social change is likelier if persons are led to regard their earthly existence as (a) important and (b) an occasion to improve things. This point of view Weber called a theodicy of "innerworldly asceticism," the second term coming from the Greek "to exercise (control over)," with the first term implying that such exercise is to be carried out in ordinary mundane activity. Social history, given this perspective, is a sequence of institutionalized behaviors subject to periodic interruption; if the interruption leads to a more innerworldly ascetic theodicy, the social impact of the interruption will be greater. These interruptions may very well be material forces, but before they change social behavior they must be meaningful, thought about, or otherwise dealt with mentally. Theodicies are relevant, therefore, because they are often invoked and/or modified as meanings change. Weber regarded these meaning changes as a proper focus of sociology.

Later efforts to "test" the Protestant Ethic thesis by comparing Protestants and Catholics ignore, therefore, Weber's own warning of 1905 that the capitalistic spirit no longer needs the support of a "caged" Protestant Ethic. They fail also in not investigating differing theodicies. Not only is a single illustration of a theory misread, in other words, but so also is the line of reasoning making up the theory.

So it is that studies believed to bear on the Protestant Ethic thesis routinely report negative—but actually irrelevant—evidence, and studies that truly bear on the Weberian perspective are rare indeed. One of these rarities is Ernest L. Tuveson's *Redeemer Nation*, a book all the more remarkable because the author, a professor of English, gives no clue that he even had Weber in mind while writing it. In this peculiar sense, the book may be regarded not only as another "illustration" of the Weberian

social change theory but as an “independent” test of its utility. It ranks in quality and approach with David Little’s *Religion, Order and Law* and Benjamin Nelson’s *The Idea of Usury*, for all three brilliantly trace histories in which changes in theodicy encouraged changes in institutionalized behavior.

The behavior in this case is American “expansionism,” the rather consistent outlook of 300 years that this nation is “chosen” to show the way for all humankind and thus is engaged in a continuing war between good and evil.

Now, it is not at all obvious that the person or nation with a monopoly on virtue is thereby obliged to redeem others. A real alternative is to seek isolation (join a monastery), that is, be “innocent in a wicked world.” In Weber’s terms, it is possible to be ascetic without being innerworldly, in which case one concentrates on controlling oneself and ignores as much as possible the full range of ordinary, worldly points of contact. Isolationism, from Jefferson onward, has held periodic appeal for America.

But the major appeal has been otherwise—interventionist, not isolationist; imperialistic, not withdrawn. America not only has regarded the Old World as corrupt and the New World as innocent, but has felt compelled to “redeem” that Old World. Why?

Tuveson, of course, is not unmindful of economic and other materialistic forces that have pushed Americans beyond their borders. Indeed, he may be too willing to concede the point: “. . . millennialist ideas probably did not inspire the greatest decisions of our nation simply by their own power. The expansion of the nation, the Civil War, the entry into the Second World War—all would have occurred in the course of things” (p. 213). What he does contend is that the history of American foreign policy cannot be understood without understanding the ideas by which participants saw their actions as meaningful. And those ideas were largely innerworldly and ascetic.

These are Weber’s and not Tuveson’s labels. Tuveson extracts more proximate terms—“apocalyptic Whiggism”—from colonial documents in which two themes predominate: “The balance of powers (idea) . . . is rooted in Renaissance political philosophy and is a feature of Whig thought. . . . It is surely secular enough. But the menaces [the documents refer to] are the whole collection from the Revelation; the man of sin is a diabolical figure quite alien to Lockean philosophy. The combination might be called apocalyptic Whiggism; it is the prototype of what was to be perhaps the central American attitude toward government” (p. 24).

Surely it is no exaggeration to see in apocalyptic Whiggism the dual inclination that Weber called innerworldly asceticism—to take this world seriously and improve upon it. Of course, the term reflects its own time and space, but “it is not hard to extend the theory: Jacobins are only the

old Papists writ in different script. It will prove equally easy to fit other menaces, as they emerge, into the same pattern—the slave-trader, the ‘Hun,’ the Bolshevist” (p. 113). Some of the clearest expressions of the view are to be found in Woodrow Wilson’s efforts, in his final speeches, to persuade the opponents of ratification of participation in the League of Nations. We must “see it through to the end and make good . . . [the] redemption of the world,” Wilson pleaded in Pueblo, Colorado. “America,” he said in Cheyenne, has “the infinite privilege of fulfilling her destiny and saving the world” (quoted on pp. 211–12). In short, even if the phrase “Manifest Destiny” did not appear until 1845, the idea behind it has long pervaded American thinking on its place in the world.

What is the source of this idea, according to Tuveson? Note that the question he faces is not, “What produced American foreign policy?” but is, instead, “Why has the dominant thinking about American foreign policy been apocalyptic Whiggism rather than something else?” The answer sounds straight out of Weber:

The crucial change came, I believe, with the reversal of the Augustinian interpretation of history, which had prevailed during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Augustine assumed that the City of God, the mystic body of the faithful, must live, usually subject to some degree of persecution, separate from the world of action . . . until the Last Judgment would roll up history itself. . . . [With the Reformation] a new examination of the whole Scripture occurred. . . . Perhaps the millennium was to be an earthly utopia, an age at the end of all history, in which, not Christ in person, but Christians and Christian principles would really be triumphant. . . . The old conception of a “chosen people,” called to fight the battles of the Lord, was revived. . . . [N]ow it appeared that God must use peoples, armies, governments, to attain his ends; God had re-entered secular history as a participant. [Pp. ix, x]

Tuveson thus traces the manifestations of apocalyptic Whiggism, especially during the century before and the century after the Revolutionary War. Finding mere expressions of it is not difficult, of course; educational and political spokesmen are as likely to speak the “chosen people” rhetoric as are clergy and literary figures. A national history that contains a Mark Hopkins, William McKinley, and Woodrow Wilson does not need its millennialist thinking embellished by a Timothy Dwight, Alexander Campbell, or Herman Melville. But America’s was; and the question is the degree of impact post-Augustinian thought has had on “common-place” events in American life.

On this score, Tuveson, while not involved in a systematic content analysis, is acutely aware. He not only cites elitist speeches; he also shows that millennial utopianism fairly oozes around everyday social structure. It is one thing to find Revelationist symbols in Edward Hicks’s paintings of lions and lambs living together in “The Peaceable Kingdom”; it is

another to see importance in the popularity of those paintings (p. 61). It is one thing to recite the long list of 19th-century theologians who embraced a millennialism; it is another to note that “this kind of thinking about history reached the common man as, it is safe to say, that of Herbert Spencer or Henry Thomas Buckle never did” (p. 54). It is one thing to recognize the numerous images drawn from the Book of Revelation contained in “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”; it is another to recognize the circumstances of its composition. Julia Ward Howe, a friend of Emerson and Oliver Wendell Holmes, was a religious liberal with no faith in special revelation or religious mysteries. Brooding over a visit to an encampment of the Army of the Potomac, however, trying to understand and then convey the meaning of “this darkest moment of American history,” she found that the strict Puritanism of her childhood “rose out of her deep memory.” Tuveson writes: “Her experience, I suggest, is typical of what has happened to many other Americans. When urgent and baffling questions about the right course for the nation have arisen, the apocalyptic view of its history has come to the front: at such times as the expansionist eras, the Civil War, the First World War” (p. 199).

It is precisely its demonstration of such ways by which the “culture” of apocalyptic Whiggism influenced American “social structure” that makes Tuveson’s book a valuable component of the Weberian library. Probably, anti-Weberians will not be convinced; it is, to repeat, more an illustration of Weber’s perspective than “proof” of it. But Weberianism, it seems, is more a matter of taste than a theory to be proved, so perhaps being a tasty delight is warrant enough. It was Marx who pointed out, years before Weber, that Luther “shattered faith in authority because he restored the authority of faith. He turned priests into laymen because he turned laymen into priests.” But it was Weber who saw this change as innerworldly asceticism and who insisted that the consequences of this change were huge and varied. *Redeemer Nation* is a welcome addition to the literature documenting just how insightful Weber was.