

AMERICAN CREED

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WHAT have people meant across the generations when they say, “I believe in America”?

In “Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion,” David Gelernter, a Yale computer-science professor and a versatile and prolific public intellectual, makes a provocative claim: Such professions of faith express “belief in . . . a religious idea of enormous, transporting power.” Indeed, he contends that America “is a biblical republic and Americanism a biblical religion.”

This does not in any way detract, Gelernter is quick to clarify, from America’s commitment to religious freedom: Liberty, democracy and equality constitute the American Creed. And Americanism entails a duty to not only realize these universal ideas at home, but to spread them around the world.

One need not believe in God to affirm Americanism. However, the determined secularism of American elites and our increasing ignorance of history make it all the more important, Gelernter argues, to appreciate that the political ideas for which America stands and the moral obligation to extend them to all mankind grow out of biblical faith, indeed have themselves come to constitute a biblical faith on a par with Judaism and Christianity.

In so arguing, Gelernter risks confusing venerable moral and political principles with the biblical teachings and transcendent and comprehensive faiths that have nourished them. He also risks underestimating the Constitution’s role in creating an institutional framework under law that daily inculcates lessons in liberty, equality and democracy. But these risks are more than compensated for by the rewards his narrative yields.

The history of Americanism begins in early 17th-century England with the Puritans. In order to practice their faith freely, these devout men and women (whom Gelernter doesn’t hesitate to call “religious fanatics”) boarded rickety boats, braved a hazardous 3,000-mile journey on the open seas, landed in a New World and strove to set up model self-governing communities that they hoped would serve as a light to all the nations.

They saw themselves as a “new chosen people” in a “new promised land.” In 1630, in words that Ronald Reagan would reverentially evoke 3½ centuries later, settler John Winthrop wrote that, “We must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.”

While acknowledging the influence of Enlightenment ideas, Gelernter maintains that Puritan faith and principles played the decisive role in the American Revolution. In 1776, the majority of colonists were Puritans, and they provided the strongest support for independence. Their faith disposed them to distrust monarchy and established churches, to believe that local communities had the right and responsibility to govern themselves and to trust that God would sustain them in the fight against a tyrannical government.

Moreover, ordinary 18th-century Americans were more at home with the Bible than with Locke and Montesquieu. They learned about liberty from the story of the Jews' exodus from Egypt, about democracy from Jethro's advice to Moses to choose judges from among the people and about equality from the paramount biblical teaching that all human beings are created in God's image.

It took Abraham Lincoln's staunch statesmanship and magnificent oratory to give Americanism its mature form. In the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural, argues Gelernter, Lincoln wove together with matchless eloquence the religious, political and moral principles that constitute Americanism. His rhetoric drew freely from, and his defense of liberty, equality and democracy were grounded in, the Bible, which he read assiduously and loved.

In the 20th century, Americanism became, Gelernter contends, a world religion. In the policies of Woodrow Wilson, Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan, Gelernter finds a faith in the universal appeal of liberty, democracy and equality, and a belief in America's duty to stand with free people and people who yearn to be free.

But with the decline of biblical faith at home and the rise of anti-Americanism abroad, will Americans, and friends of liberty, democracy, and equality around the world, keep faith with Americanism through the difficult months and years ahead? Gelernter affirms his faith in the faith. May his loving and compelling reconstruction of its intellectual origins contribute to its renewal.

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