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A People “Almost Chosen” by God:
Understanding Abraham Lincoln in Post-Secular Italy

1. Many of us recall the astonishment caused in 1976 by the election as President of the United States of a man, Jimmy Carter, who declared himself to be a born again Christian. It seemed incoherent that the President of the most advanced and secularized state in the world, a man who had been an official on a nuclear submarine – one of the strongest symbols of technology and disenchantment of the world –, was not so much a generic believer, but claimed to have passed through an intense religious experience that continued to guide his life. Carter’s profound evangelical faith was, however, something entirely personal, which left us unprepared for what was to occur four years later when, with the election of Ronald Reagan, it seemed clear that his own and his party’s conservatism constituted an out and out novelty, far removed from both the retro and rather gloomy traditionalism of the American conservatives of the ’Fifties, and the elitist one of the so-called Wall Street republicanism, of whom Nelson Rockefeller was a major exponent. It was a conservatism that was modernizing and modernist, vibrant and optimistic, founded on the ideals of progress, well-being, mass society, on an individualism to be proven by the capacity to attain success in a dynamic and competitive world. It was also populist and inextricably bound – paradoxical as it might seem at the time – to the most radical evangelical sects and churches, which were not only winning millions of followers at the expense of the mainstream churches, but were bent upon re-christianizing the United States.

The question that springs to mind at this point is whether there is something intrinsic and inevitable in the alliance between the theoreticians of neo-conservatism, who we know are mainly secular intellectuals, many of whom are not Protestants, but Catholics or Jews,¹ and the multiform, inflamed, and often conflictual universe of radical Evangelical Protestantism. The answer is evidently no: in the history of the United States the relationship between religion and public square, to use Richard Neuhaus’ expression, has both progressive and conservative ramifications. Suffice it to recall the “Social Gospel” movement that fueled American Progressivism from the late Nineteenth century up to the New Deal, or the strong evangelical connotations of the civil rights movement of the ’Fifties and ’Sixties.² What is peculiar to the United States is not the alliance between faith and conservatism, but rather the way in which the relationship between faith and public sphere developed. This is the question that must be addressed.

In post-war Italy, for whom the United States represented an ideal of modernity, we long considered *l’America* as the model secular state, the first country to introduce the separation between church and state with the First Amendment to the Constitution. While this view fulfilled the political and intellectual dreams of the reforming Left, it scared the Catholic world which tended to impute American secularism to the dominant Protestantism of the United States. More recently it has become clear that in reality the First Amendment served the purpose of protecting religious freedom from the presence of an official state church, rather than bringing the secularization so desired or feared by us. In general, however, there was little probing of what faith and protection of religious freedom really meant in the United States. Thus, there has been little success in placing the United States and Italy within a correct mutual perspective.

As an Americanist, I cannot accept either of these alternatives, both of which stand in the way of a correct scientific assessment of United States history, leading to errors in political judgment. A

better approach to the history of the United States is, I believe, one that interprets it as part of the system of “Greater Europe,” born from the system including the European states extended to states of a European matrix arising in the Americas with the dissolution of colonial systems. This system underwent rather similar processes of modernization, managed with cultural instruments that were also related. In each of the system’s states, however, such processes were dealt with in specific ways, in keeping with local situations, with results that were at times convergent, at times divergent and contradictory.³

The need – child of the Enlightenment – to separate the political and religious spheres arose simultaneously in various states of Greater Europe, including the United States, which was destined to confront the issue at the very moment of its foundation. The problem was therefore common, but the solutions turned out to be specific and peculiar. The French solution, for example, developed from the years of the Revolution to those of the Third Republic and aimed at a clear cut separation between state and church based on an entirely secular republican ideology that has been passed down to us. In Great Britain, Protestant religious patriotism, embodied in the bifrontal – secular and religious - institution of the monarchy and in the presence of the spiritual Peers of the House of Lords, instead made impossible a true separation between state and church; but religious tolerance, the rapid march of bourgeois modernization and the constitutionalism centering upon individual rights and the political supremacy of the House of Commons has prevented in practice the reliance of the political domain on the teachings of the Anglican church. In Italy the situation was different again, due to the presence of the “Catholic question” and the weakness of the nation, which have resulted in a formally strong state-church separation that is often very weak in concrete. It is perfectly in line with a systemic vision of Greater Europe if in the United States the question of relations between faith and the

public sphere has followed modalities adapted to the local situation.

2. The revolutionary United States presented a greatly varied and complex religious situation inherited from the colonial years: religious tolerance was propounded in all thirteen colonies-turned-states, but the Congregationalist church was the established church throughout New England, the Anglican-derived Episcopalian church fulfilled this function in most of the others, while some, including New York and Pennsylvania, favored a full religious freedom. The majority of the population was, however, religiously indifferent and did not belong to any church, while the revolutionary leadership was made up of a mainly deist social elite. Nonetheless, among minority but by no means marginal circles, the revolution was accompanied by eschatological expectations, for example, that it might herald the return of Christ and the millennium; the idea that the American people were a new Israel, a people with a special pact with God, was also widespread.⁴

It was not then the membership of different churches that divided the Americans in patriots and loyalists, even though the attack against the established church, which arose first in Virginia and later spread to other states, was a consequence of revolutionary ideology. What conferred a public character on the established church of a state was the duty of its inhabitants, even those belonging to different confessions, to pay a tax for the maintenance of that church's pastors. The struggle won by Jefferson in Virginia in 1786 with the approval of the statute on religious freedom – a battle that paved the way for the First Amendment to the Constitution – consisted of the abolition, as requested by the other Virginian churches, of this duty in the name of the religious freedom recognized to all citizens.⁵ The result of his victory was, at the same time, to transform churches into private bodies, sustained by the donations of their

congregations, and to guarantee full liberty to all possible forms of religious worship.

I believe that several conclusions may be drawn from the approval of the Statute of Virginia and the First Amendment. Clearly, neither was intended as a means to arrive at the secularization of society; they were instead the expression of a principle of liberty that foresaw and protected freedom of conscience with regard to religious faith. It is highly probable that for Thomas Jefferson this involved striving for a rationalist vision of the sacred that was far removed from traditional Christianity, and therefore something very similar to what we might call secularization. It was a secularization, however, that did not aim to penalize the faith of believers, but one that would allow liberty and reason to assert themselves in society in a gradual and natural way. For the many who did not belong to any church the prohibition of an established church was undoubtedly seen as a measure that exempted them from paying a tax of no relevance to them, and therefore as a measure bringing freedom. However, it is also true that for the Congregationalists who supported Jefferson's battle in Virginia, and for the overwhelming majority of other church members, the end of any form of established church was regarded as a means allowing them to pursue freely their own road of faith, one in which they believed passionately. Thus, there is a convergence of wills in the First Amendment, which makes it a far more complex measure than may appear at first sight.

So, while the newly constituted United States confronted the same problem posed throughout Enlightenment Europe, of separating public institutions from religious ones, the way in which they did so was different and specific. In Europe it generally triggered off struggles against the church that retained the monopoly on religion, leading both to the birth of secular, materialist thought and to the rise of anticlerical political movements. In her American ex-colonies, Britain – primarily preoccupied with the economic workings of empire – had never

imposed the Anglican church throughout, nor promoted its establishment with the appointment of American bishops. After the Glorious Revolution, she had left the settlers entirely free to organize their religious life. The same area was also to become host to numerous immigrant groups of Christians belonging to the most radical churches and sects of European Protestantism. Unsurprisingly, the issue of separation between the religious and institutional sphere assumed in America a very different character. On the one hand, the colonial and later revolutionary sociopolitical and economic elites did not dispose of the means of administering discipline enjoyed by the European aristocracies and elites— it is sufficient to mention that they had no legal or de facto monopoly on the main means of production, the land, and that the citizens were armed, with their militia undertaking policing duties. On the other, no church had the public means enjoyed by the churches of the Old World to exercise a monopoly of the religious sphere or oversee the religious discipline of the populations.

In a society considerably less organized than those of Europe, faith assumed a primary cultural and social value, working from below as a binder of what were normally small, scattered, and often isolated communities; it was not identified with public realities socially or culturally high with respect to the mass of the population. Its religious institutions enjoyed neither the power, nor the authority, nor the charisma of the European ones; not even in the cases when they were established and their cultural influence was dominant, were they able to maintain a strong institutional role for long. While it is true that in various cases, as in New England, the resistance of the Congregationalist church made it difficult to achieve, the separation of the two spheres was therefore of a type that did not cast doubt upon the role of churches and Christianity as such; on the contrary, it ended up strengthening them. On the one hand, in fact, the enlightened deism of the elites did not radicalize, nor filtered from the elites to other social groups; on the other, the churches, with the

exception of the established ones, already used to existing as private bodies within society, were not deprived of an institutional role they had never enjoyed, and indeed saw their role in society reinforced.

Thus, Christianity asserted itself in the nineteenth-century United States to the point of becoming one with the culture of the country, an inextricably interwoven element of American society and its dynamics. Also thanks to this, it assumed a public role without being institutionalized, and without the latter fact entering into contradiction with the separation between state and church envisaged by the First Amendment.

3. The plurality of Christianities unbound from institutions that developed in the United States assumed an important public role thanks to its centrality in key episodes of American history. At least three fundamental episodes serve to illustrate the point.

The first concerns the Evangelical revivals that flared up along the frontier in the late eighteenth century, spreading through the rest of the country during the early decades of the nineteenth century.⁶ The phenomenon led to the conversion of broad sectors of the population that had been previously religiously indifferent, triggering a crisis among the older, more established churches. Sociologically linked to the fears, anxieties and dislocation of a mobile, sparse population, that was often scattered over an immense territory, engaged both in a search for roots and in the endeavor to overcome deprivation, the revivals offered a safe haven for many Americans. The itinerant Methodist and Baptist preachers, the missionary heroes who started the revivals, were inspired by the fire of the Word, preaching a Christianity that was theologically crude, but efficient in responding to both the need for certainty and the individualistic urge toward self-betterment, to win by force of will power a way out of poverty, as well spiritual salvation. With their constant reference to the letter of the Bible, they offered the vision and certainty – so characteristic of evangelical

Protestantism – of a salvation based on a personal relationship that any man/woman could have with Christ, without the mediation of any ecclesiastic institution. In this way, they not only imparted a positive and optimistic message of individual salvation, but they legitimized and strengthened the urge to self-realization, the right/duty of each individual to better him-/herself, which was one of the characteristics of American society in those decades. American Christianity thus proves to have been culturally specific, intimately linked to the social culture developing within the country, acquiring a growing influence as a result.

Political democracy, which started to assert itself in the 'Twenties, also found revival Protestantism to be an essential support, since its insistence on real equality among all believers strengthened that among all citizens; it had a populist and anti-elitist base that in the religious sphere manifested itself in attacks on cultured churches and cultured ministers, deaf to the Word of God, which in politics translated into an attack on all elites, whether based on money, learning or profession. Furthermore, the rhetorical techniques of revivalist preachers was founded on camp-meetings attended by hundreds or even thousands of people, who were subjected to days and days of hammering sermons delivered by often self-taught ministers and preachers, accompanied by the rallying music of small evangelical orchestras. Such techniques were copied by politicians in the fight for universal male suffrage and in setting up the American national parties.⁷

Finally, Protestantism played a crucial role in American nation-building, since it viewed the struggle for freedom undertaken by the revolutionaries and the Founding Fathers as a direct consequence of the Christian freedom that nurtured and sustained the political liberty of the people. If we add to this the idea of the American people as the New Israel, the chosen people favored by God, which permeated all the churches, as well as the eschatological expectations of the many Evangelicals who awaited

Christ's return in the United States, as the supreme Christian nation, we can appreciate the degree to which the American nation and nationalism are intricately interwoven with protestant religious fervor.

4. American Christianity, in its protestant and evangelical components, as well as in its catholic one, has therefore been, and continues to be, outstandingly popular and populist, linked to a specific American cultural matrix that is far removed from Italian experience; it can however be understood in the light of the close relationship that exists between American democracy and American Christianity.

If the many forms and expressions of democracy are united in its expression of popular sovereignty, in the US such sovereignty assumes the form of "self-rule by the individual": it is a political system that grants all the right to support themselves with their own efforts, and to show that they can survive and progress by their own efforts.⁸ It is a harsh ideal, in which personal responsibility takes pride of place, and which presupposes the existence of conditions allowing all citizens to attain tangible results through their own efforts; it implies that the economic, social and cultural instruments necessary to arrive at this type of democracy are effectively present. The historic reasons leading to this specific concept of democracy – and of freedom – are too numerous and complex to go into at present. So I limit myself to a brief remark. What I wish to underline is that part and parcel of this ideal of freedom and democracy is the protestant and evangelical declension of the Christian message, as a message addressed directly to the individual by God through His Word contained in the Scriptures.

The Word may be "spoken," passed on, by ministers and preachers; it may be institutionalized according to the creed of a particular persuasion; but it is always the believer that accepts it and makes it his/her own in a personal, direct way, through his/her own efforts and will. The autonomy and self-government

that characterize democracy in the United States are attributes precisely of American Protestantism: a Christianity of quest, of seekerism, a personal and direct search for the road to salvation. The central theme, present in America since the late-eighteenth century, is one emphasizing the full personal responsibility of the believer: when we find ourselves before God and will be called upon to justify our errors, we will not be able to say that we erred because we obeyed the instructions of a teacher, a superior, or a minister. God will immediately insist that each person is responsible for him/herself, and that the way of righteousness is in the Scriptures, not in the dogma or doctrine of any church. The only true road to salvation is Christ, and each individual must find him alone.

Because it is profoundly rooted in everyday life and the personal experience of the individual in a dynamic, mobile society, so little institutionalized and little “disciplined,” to borrow a term from modern European history, American Christianity is as creative and fragmented as are the individual experiences of its faithful. It is prone to continual tensions and sudden tremors as it is nowhere else, with the constant appearance of new prophets and new religious sects: Joseph Smith and the Mormons, Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science, the biblical fundamentalism of the late nineteenth century, and the white and black charismatic and Pentecostal churches of the early twentieth century.⁹ These are merely some of the best known expressions of a Christianity in constant turmoil, which ably mastered the opportunities of modern technology, creating the radio preachers of the 1930s, starting with the Catholic Father Coughlin, and has recently invented the “megachurches” and TV-preachers, at the same time functioning as institutions of faith, economic power-houses, places of socialization, and of spiritual and psychological support.¹⁰ Since this Christianity is not primarily an institution, it does not require an institutionalized relationship with the state. Its historic evolution shows how the state-church separation neither

threatens nor indeed affects it, since its roots lie firmly embedded in the deepest reaches of the national culture, and its public role does not operate within an institutional dynamic with the state, but through its interaction with the people and the political will that they express.

It is hardly surprising therefore if one of the unifying elements of a structurally plural Christianity, organized around single assemblies, congregations, and parishes rather than religious hierarchies (something that is true even of Catholicism), is the figure of Jesus – “personal savior, cultural hero, national obsession,” as described by Richard Wightman Fox in the subtitle of a recent book. It is the personal relationship with Jesus that has characterized and continues to characterize American Christianity in all its forms, and it is the figure of Jesus that we find at the centre of the various regional, ethnic and ideological subcultures emerging throughout American history.

For the blacks, during and after slavery, Jesus is the one who teaches that the last shall be first and that theirs is the kingdom of God. He is the one who helps to endure the tribulations of the present, showing the way toward a different world, a world that can exist now, even if not in the daily world of earthly life. With Christ leading us on like an older brother, hand in hand like a friend, we are transported out of the here and now, to live in the world of his word and his life, his suffering and his triumph.¹¹ This is a recurrent theme among the black churches. With Martin Luther King it was transposed into the theme of non-violence, of being lambs like Christ, firm like him in pursuing justice until attaining triumph;¹² a triumph that was a vindication both of one’s being as a Christian, and of one’s rights as an American citizen. By contrast, the Jesus of the Southern whites after the Civil War is the Christ suffering on the cross, showing his people the way of suffering to be better united with him, revealing how defeat in war was a test that Christ had imposed on the people he loved – the Confederate people who chose to fight for their own freedom and for Christian freedom.¹³ Hundreds of examples

could be cited to bear witness to the centrality of Jesus in American culture.¹⁴ Suffice it to recall one more, specific and marginal, concerning the mainstream culture that has led to the triumph of the US in the twentieth century. In the progressive protestant world of the early 1900s, Christ became the true individualist, the one who fought against the old law of the Pharisees, that is, against tradition, in name of progress, liberty, and life. He is practical, innovator, not contemplative. It is no surprise that in the 1920s, at the beginning of the age of advertising, one of the fathers of modern mass publicity, Bruce Barton, in a famous book, presented Jesus as the most successful “salesman” in history, able to enlist twelve non-entities and to transform them into the founders of the world’s biggest and most enduring commercial organization.¹⁵ Barton had no sacrilegious intent, and his message met with applause, not condemnation.

Christ is present in American history as a guide to eternal life, but also as a reassuring earthly guide, taking the believer by the hand as he journeys through the daily life of a society that possesses an open ended culture exalting the new, discovery, and change, one in which the individual has institutional and traditional supports that are not entirely secure.

5. If one of the central themes of western modernity has been that of an increasing socio-cultural complexity and of a reciprocal autonomy of the various spheres of human activity, among which are “the political” and “the religious,”¹⁶ such a theme has been and continues to be present as much in the United States as in the other states of the Greater Europe system. Within this perspective, the state-church separation constitutes the institutional aspect of such autonomy; but it is not a normatively or univocally defined dogma. It is rather a process that has unfolded in different ways and for different reasons within the different states. In the United States it arose in response to a number of preoccupations: to prevent the public sphere from imposing an official state church, to negate the possibility that

such a church might gain the upper hand over the Republic, as feared by Jefferson, or to ensure that religious freedom could not be set at risk by the state or by an established church; it was also to prevent that any church, by becoming an instrument or repository of political power, might end up disfigured, deprived of its spiritual mission, as feared by the founder of American Baptism, Roger Williams, as far back as the seventeenth century.¹⁷

Historically, therefore, the purpose of the state-church separation in the US was never to exclude faith from assuming a role in the public sphere, but rather to prevent any single denomination, or single creed, from taking control of it. What is difficult to understand for Italians, accustomed as we are to a quasi public monopoly of faith by the Catholic church, is the meaning of the presence of faith in the public sphere in a situation in which religious discourse is formulated in a way that is as pluralist and varied as political or social discourse. In the US there has never existed a “Christian question,” in the way that a “Catholic question” has existed and continues to exist in Italy, where it is a question regarding not so much faith itself, but the role of a dominant religious institution, the Catholic church, vis-à-vis another institution, the state. The Italian situation sees two institutions that contend sovereignty, or part of it, over the same community. As a result, nation-building in Italy has been rendered problematic not so much by Christianity, as by the question of the presence and role of the Catholic church. And we continue, even today, to have difficulty in getting to grips with this intractable question. This Catholic question has made it difficult even for other European Catholics to appreciate fully how things stand on the other side of the Atlantic. That is why I suspect that Tocqueville failed to understand correctly what was happening beyond the Atlantic, when he stated that in the United States democracy and religion advanced hand in hand in giving life to a climate of freedom. His point of view was in fact that of a liberal French Catholic, with little inkling of the “seekerism” of American Christianity. His dream was of a Catholic church that

was a friend of liberty, and of a French state allied to a liberal Catholicism, something wholly dissimilar from the American situation.

In the United States faith has served as a vital support in nation-building and the development of democracy, and has always been present in American public discourse, since religion has always been institutionally weak. Faith has therefore been able to become a common language that social, economic, ethnic, territorial groups and interests could use in different, and at times conflicting ways, to articulate their requests, without any single denomination attempting to impose, through a single creed, any single public interest. This situation has had the effect, in our eyes paradoxical, of halting the advance of atheism and materialism and, with them, of socialism. Indeed, it has contributed to making atheism, materialism and socialism appear to be the enemies of the nation, and therefore fundamentally unacceptable to the majority of Americans.

A further paradoxical result has been that the strongest opposition to the public role of Christianity in the United States has not come from the radical or socialist left, but from the rigorously bourgeois and capitalist progressive reformers, who from the early twentieth century on, played the key role in building modern America and the power of the US. Evolutionists, often positivists, committed to a vigorous concept of economic progress and an ideal of mass society where the individual liberty to build one's life in one's own image was an article of faith, progressive reformers were able in the 'Twenties to crush the evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity of the countryside and the popular classes, expelling it from the accepted and acceptable public discourse of an advanced industrial society. It was the progressives who, by substituting Christianity with science as the normative factor of both politics and ethics, presented themselves as the cultural pillars of the church-state separation implemented by the Supreme Court during the twentieth century. It is true that this facilitated the full

assimilation of Catholics, Orthodox, and Jews in a cultural universe no longer dominated by Protestantism.¹⁸ Nonetheless, it was an attempted cultural revolution.

As said before, when the United States became a massive and constant presence on the Italian horizon after Second world war, the Italians saw it as the fulcrum *par excellence* of modernization and secularization, the quintessentially secular state, in which faith by now played a purely private role. For those who feared an overbearing presence of the Catholic church in the public sphere, the United States became an example of a correct “privatization” of faith. The truth of the matter was instead that it was a particular historical juncture, that of the maximum triumph of technocratic liberalism, which Italian ignorance of American reality mistook for a supposed, permanent American identity. As a result the Italians took little notice of the massive revivals inspired by the preaching of Billy Graham in the 'Fifties and 'Sixties,¹⁹ considering them, as did the American progressive elites, merely retrograde phenomena. Neither was there any inclination to even acknowledge the evangelical nature of the black civil rights movement, the tendency being to admire its anti-establishment political stance. Likewise, the constant religious references in the speeches of American politicians were regarded simply as elements of political rhetoric, albeit rather ridiculous and cunning. That is why we were taken completely by surprise not only by the secular neo-conservatism of the 'Seventies and 'Eighties, but also by the vitality and galvanizing force of radical evangelicalism.

6. It now remains to draw the present consequences of the situation described so far.

The following points are clear, I hope: the United States has dealt with the problem of the relationship between faith and the public domain, a common problem of all modern western states, in a way suited to its own historic development; American Christianity, in its institutional, theological, cultural and

sociological character is very far removed from the Italian reality; it has never been expelled from the public sphere and has actively participated in the construction of American institutions, the functioning of the political system, and political struggles; the attempt to curb its public influence was captained not by philosophical or political radicalism, but by modernizing capitalism of the more advanced middle classes. Against this background, we must now seek the reasons behind the contemporary alliance between secular neo-conservatism and radical evangelicalism. We must at least also speculate upon the type of influence we believe it may have on the United States and its international role. Finally, we must ponder as to whether it could serve as a model to analogous operations in countries other than the US.

The starting point can be none other than the remarkable growth of evangelical fundamentalist, charismatic, and Pentecostal churches at the expense of the more institutionalized denominations, including Catholicism, a phenomenon of a popular character linked to the “elitist detachment” of the traditional churches from the preaching of salvation. The political appearance on the scene of the evangelicals and their alliance with the neo-conservatives are inextricably bound to this phenomenon. Consider the Vietnam war and the contrasting phenomena of the radical opposition to the war, and detente with the Soviet Union promoted by the internationalist conservative, Henry Kissinger, and again, the radicalism of the 'Sixties, with its entourage of feminism, black power, gay power, and its attack against the bulwarks of traditional authority— the family, homeland, work-ethic and myth of success. These are now regarded by many scholars as the trigger that unleashed the reaction on the part of both secular society and Christians, which led to the rise of Reaganite conservatism and the so-called “culture wars” of the 'Eighties.²⁰

The political and cultural radicalism of the 'Sixties and 'Seventies had enormous cultural ambitions, and led to an assault

against the very heart of the paradigm underpinning twentieth-century America, whether religious, progressive or conservative. This statement may seem contradictory after having singled out progressivism and its successors, Roosevelt and Kennedy-Johnson liberalism, as the factors most responsible for challenging the tradition that attributed to religion such an important role in the American public sphere. It was, however, one of the most unrepentant liberals, the historian Arthur Schlesinger jr., who wrote of the danger of an American “disunion” caused by multiculturalist radicalism. A signal of this type, and it was certainly not the only one, meant that while twentieth-century progressives had indeed abandoned the Christian paradigm of America dominating the nineteenth-century United States, and had attacked and marginalized fundamentalist and anti-modern evangelicalism, it had not cast doubt upon the pillars upholding traditional morality, or upon the idea of the existence of an objective natural order of which they too were part. In other words the progressives had replaced the authority of faith with that of science as the basic instance legitimizing public life; but the principles of the social and moral order that science enacted were not considered substantially different from those of faith, in its modern interpretation.

Radicalism instead propounded a revolution that did challenge not only the principle of authority of both science and faith, but also the moral contents and epistemological principles on which both were founded. In the light of this, it is understandable how in the conservative camp, but not only, there arose a fear of a true crisis of authority, one that might lead to nihilism and chaos.²¹

It was in response to this crisis that the neo-conservatives rose to prominence, unsurprisingly drawing many from the ranks of the Democratic Party. They were the ones who perceived the extremism of radicalism, its attempt to subvert the objective foundations of the authority on which they thought a healthy society is based and, above all, the role and identity of the American nation. The questioning of the symbols that served to

maintain the soundness of society, from the traditional family to sexual identity, from the work ethic, to meritocracy, and the market, would not only have led to chaos; it would have reduced the status of the US to that of a nation among other nations, subject to the limits and errors of a modernity considered by the radicals to be authoritarian and illiberal. The attack on American exceptionalism and on the historic role of freedom in the United States,²² was for the neo-conservatives the culmination of the challenge against the principle of authority, and constituted a threat to the entire idea of a classic, Judeo-Christian inheritance of liberty, which formed the basis of the western values of which the United States are the true heirs.

The neo-conservatives were secular intellectuals having close ties with the business world quaking before the apparent decline of 'Seventies America. They understood perfectly how radicalism generated profound dismay and fear also among evangelical circles, who saw in it an attempt to impose a society of sin. From an evangelical point of view, abortion, homosexuality, the destruction of the patriarchal family, the Supreme Court's rulings against symbolic forms of religious piety, such as school prayers, were all clear signals of a devil-inspired attempt to wipe out faith and impose atheism on Americans. Their reaction was hardly unpredictable. The neo-conservatives grasped how it was not relegated to marginal groups, but was shared by significant portions of society. An alliance was born that, starting with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, has never faltered.

For the purposes of this essay, it is also important to observe how evangelicalism has been left intact after a half century prevalence of a technocratic culture and consumer capitalism that subordinated faith to science on the public scene. Not only that, the evangelicals have appropriated the modern means of management and communication, creating an active and vast network of colleges and biblical associations, publishing houses, and evangelical radio stations that have deeply entrenched the so-called “old religion” in many areas of the country, especially in

the South and the Great Plains. In their numerous variants, from the Southern Baptists that formed the original nucleus, to the charismatic and Pentecostal churches, the evangelicals had generally paid little attention to politics. They believed society to be unreformable and that the Christian's task as a missionary was to save souls. During the Cold War, however, they had joined in a series of anti-communist and patriotic crusades, even if the anti-communism of all Administrations allowed them to adopt an essentially neutral stance between Republicans and Democrats, participating little in the electoral process, as they had always done. The radical counter-culture and attack on American exceptionalism, which to them seemed to threaten the idea that America was the chosen land of the Christian mission, made them amenable to the appeals of the neo-conservatives, drawing them into the political arena. At the same time, they themselves became increasingly radicalized, with fundamentalism gaining ground within their ranks. The effect of the joining of forces between evangelicals and neo-conservatives has been to split the United States down the middle, breaking the cultural hegemony of the technocratic and scientific culture – liberal or conservative – that had conquered the nation during the twentieth century.

The events in recent decades do not constitute a deviation from the way in which the question of the faith-politics relationship has been managed historically in the United States, even if they represent a major development with respect to the main twentieth-century American tradition.

At this point it is useful to return to the title of my paper, Lincoln's statement that the people of the Union was "almost" chosen by God, made in response to a Northern minister who had proclaimed during the Civil War that the Union was a nation chosen by God. Lincoln, whose faith was as anti-dogmatic as it was severe,²³ meant with this that one must not turn the nation into an idol, raising it to the status of God: one must not, that is, turn the nation into a religion. I have the deep suspicion that that is precisely what is happening today in the United States, and it is

on this point that the critique of secular and religious neo-conservatism must focus.

It is not, I reiterate, the entrance of religion in the “public square” to surprise us, because this has constantly occurred in the US. The real problem is that the evangelicals have entered politics to support the views of the secular neo-conservatives as to the necessity of defending American exceptionalism, that is to say, the absolute meaning of the American experiment with freedom. And it is an “experiment” that has assumed all the characteristics of the truth of faith. As I said before, the neo-conservative reaction has been unleashed in response to the insistence of the radical left that American freedom is riddled with the same flaws encountered throughout the western world, and that therefore the United States is not a “chosen” nation. It is a deeply nationalist reaction aimed at re-legitimizing American political supremacy in the world through a re-assertion of the country’s historic exceptionalism, and of the absolute values it embodies. The nationalistic slant adopted by the political right has stirred the majority of American evangelicals, galvanizing them toward a political activism far removed from their traditions, but perceived as necessary. Most evangelicals live with a strong sense of the presence of sin in human life; they see the United States as the only place in which this threat is tempered by a happy union between political freedom and Christian freedom, making it easier to attain friendship with Jesus. This makes them perceive the radical threat from within the country as unbearable and mortal, and has convinced them to fight for the defense of order – the absolute and natural order of the moral, social and economic values that the United States represents more than any other country, by divine will (if Lincoln will allow!)

7. It is not easy to understand the alliance between the American political right and Christian right from an Italy in which the “Catholic question” hangs like a mill-stone over every aspect of politics, where debates, discussions and the political stances of

believers are subject to the scrutiny and prescriptions of a monopolistic religious institution. The risk is to apply unconsciously the same assumptions to the American situation. There, however, faith is a far more personal issue, regulated by impulses, needs and stimuli that arise from the social environment, over which religious institutions are hard pressed to prevail. Consequently, American Christianity may appear intellectually less appealing than Italian Catholicism. With its populist character, like much of American social culture, in many of its manifestations it may appear much more a phenomenon of consumption and communication in a consumerist and image culture,²⁴ than may be deemed desirable to the supercilious eye of even a secularized Italian. And yet, it is precisely this that makes it more dynamic, allowing ample space also to the many non-Christian faiths that immigration has brought to America. The alliance between the political and Christian right in the name of American exceptionalism is merely the latest in a long series of episodes in which religious denominations have intervened in a political struggle in defense of the faith. As such it is by no means a novelty. In addition, the fact that the alliance has turned out to be successful does not at all exclude the existence of religious denominations and believers, even evangelical believers, who do not share its goals and who oppose it on both religious and political grounds,²⁵ while others remain neutral. If the entry of “the religious” into the political arena is part of a more generalized post-secular phase experienced by the United States as in other parts of the world, it is the specific character assumed by it that must be taken into consideration. We should bear in mind, however, that the revival of “the religious” in both Christian and non-Christian countries has almost everywhere assumed the character of a return to the purity of the origins, in opposition to the disappointed hopes of western modernization, or rather, against the inevitable and difficult uprooting of tradition that it involves. This explains the ethnic and nationalistic character it has sometimes assumed and, more in general, what is

defined as fundamentalism, the return to the indisputable authority of the sacred texts. In this too, the American situation does not turn out to be very different from that elsewhere; the specificity consists of what the United States is and represents in the contemporary world.

In its case, post-secularism does not arise from any discontent with consumer society or technology: most members of the Christian right have no ecological concerns, are not anti-capitalist in any of the numerous modes of anti-capitalism; except in a few marginal cases, they have no problem with democracy, or with the political and civil rights of individuals, regarded as part and parcel of the American freedom. Indeed, the Christian right presents itself as the one true defender of these values against the radical onslaught. The American conservative post-secularity is a reaction against the aforementioned radicalism, which questioned the objectivity of the values underpinning western modernity, thus casting doubt on the role of the United States as the first defender of the west. In brief, it is the universalism of the American historic experiment, a universalism of providential origin, that the Christian right perceives to be under threat from the radicalism of those who deny the equation between reason, universal moral values, the democracy founded upon them, and the United States. The external threats of Islamic fundamentalism merely adds fuel to the fire of public mission that the Christian right feels obliged to assume.

All this requires reflection, because this outburst of post-secularity on the American public scene is a historic phenomenon that, because of the specific configuration assumed by the relationship between politics and religion in the United States, it seems to be structurally far less worrying than it might be elsewhere, starting with Italy. I say this from the standpoint of one who belongs to the secular culture, and who believes that secularism does not possess truths superior to those of believers. It is my belief that it is the means and institutions through which both secular men and believers express themselves what defines

the type of relationship existing between them. The real, serious problem in the case of the United States is the fact that the come back of “the religious” has taken the form of political nationalism and of a closed, intransigent culture. In view of the country’s global political role and its significance as the laboratory of extreme modernity – or post-modernity if one prefers – this has consequences that are difficult to see as auspicious.

NOTES

¹ See Kristol; and Steinfels.

² See Curtis; Gorrell; Marsh; Burns; Chappell; and Brooks.

³ See Bonazzi, “Constructing” and “Europa.”

⁴ See Bonomi; O.Hatch; and Bloch.

⁵ See Dreisbach.

⁶ See Butler; McLoughlin; and Cross.

⁷ See Butler; and Wiebe, *Opening*.

⁸ See Wiebe, *Self-Rule*.

⁹ See Taves.

¹⁰ See Ahlstrom; and Gaustad and Schmidt.

¹¹ See Bloom.

¹² See Garrow.

¹³ See Miller; Stout and Wilson; and Goldfield.

¹⁴ See Moore, *Touchdown Jesus*.

¹⁵ See also Ewen; and Moore, *Touchdown Jesus*.

¹⁶ The expression “the political” is widely used in political theory.

¹⁷ See Hall.

¹⁸ See Herberg.

¹⁹ See Wellman; Martin; and Marsden.

²⁰ See Hunter; Gitlin; and Berman.

²¹ See Wilcox and Larson; Patrick; Capps; and Wuthnow.

²² See Stephanson; Tuveson; and Lipset.

²³ “I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle.” Abraham

Lincoln, February 21, 1861, Speech to the New Jersey Senate; as quoted in Ginger.

²⁴ See Moore, *Selling*.

²⁵ See Jim Wallis.

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