

[*Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion*, David Gelernter, Doubleday, 240 pages]

Will This God Also Fail?

By Paul Gottfried

IN *AMERICANISM*, a book-length discussion of the “American fourth religion,” David Gelernter fleshes out a theme he broached last year in *Commentary*. A mathematician and computer expert at Yale University, Gelernter first gained recognition 14 years ago for the toughness he displayed as a victim of the Unabomber after an attack that caused him severe physical injuries. He is a vigorous stylist, whose writing is marked by unfailingly forceful prose. If he were not riding a hobbyhorse—and one outside his expertise—his latest product would be much stronger. Unfortunately, the author’s tics get the better of him.

Although Gelernter does not dwell on his choice of title, his “fourth great Western religion,” after Judaism, Catholicism, and Protestantism, refers to a distillation of the messianic American democratic conversionary faith that has supposedly accompanied Americans from the settlement of the Massachusetts Bay Colony onward. The faith that Gelernter presents is recognizably Protestant, but is also thought to be compatible with other religious traditions, particularly Old Testament Judaism as filtered through the author’s worldview. Gelernter’s study of Americanism brings to mind Will Herberg’s widely read exercise in religious sociology of 1955, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. Tracing the transformation of America’s different faith traditions into a civil religion, Herberg was impressed by the impact of Americanization on religious thinking and practice. Significantly, he found this tendency to be worrisome and indicative of a certain spiritual shallowness. Needless to say, Gelernter feels

no such misgivings about his version of the “fourth religion.”

Gelernter’s preferred view of American history, which is indistinguishable from that of a mainstream Cold War liberal from the 1950s, emphasizes political hagiography. Its protagonists are the anti-slavery Emancipator and “America’s last and greatest founding father” Abraham Lincoln, the “Puritan” John Brown, Woodrow Wilson, who fought to “make the world safe for democracy,” Harry Truman, etc. The reader can fill in the rest of the slots reserved for Gelernter’s heroes and villains, that is, figures in a moral saga who seem to have been recycled from a mid-20th-century high-school civics textbook.

In order to locate the roots of our civil religion, the author starts predictably with the Puritans. As with Rorschach tests, Gelernter tells us much about himself by presenting the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a New World replication of Rabbinic Judaism. And though Protestant Calvinists were Hebraizing, Old Testament Christians, one may challenge the assumed degree of affinity between the Rabbis and Puritan divines.

GELERNTER TELLS US MUCH ABOUT HIMSELF BY PRESENTING THE MASSACHUSETTS BAY COLONY AS A NEW WORLD REPLICATION OF RABBINIC JUDAISM.

Gelernter’s treatment of America’s entry into World War I, a subject to which he devotes considerable space in this short book, reveals an *idée fixe* resting more on emotion than hard facts. Gelernter overstates his case by singling out Germany’s unleashing of the Schlieffen Plan as the “simple” cause of the outbreak of the war. Although the implementation of what turned out to be an unworkable plan may have been “the most decisive event of the twentieth century,” Germany’s three-pronged attack on France leading to the enveloping of Paris did not occur, *pace* Gelernter, as an exercise in Teutonic machismo. By the 1890s, the Germans faced an encircling Russo-French alliance. When they began their march

on France through Belgium, as the Schlieffen plan demanded, they were assuming, with good reason, that France’s ally, Russia, would attack them from the east. The German general staff jumped the gun by making a preemptive strike in the west, but they did so, according to the German historian Gerhard Ritter, out of “fatalism and desperation.” Informing Gelernter’s anti-German sentiment, beside the bitter memories of Nazi atrocities, may be the thesis of historian Fritz Fischer regarding Germany’s supposed bid for world domination. According to Fischer, the German government, cheered on by its rabidly nationalist subjects, plunged Europe into a general war as a means of economic and territorial expansion. Although this thesis is full of unproved premises, it would be helpful to be able to confront it directly in Gelernter’s book—rather than having to guess from whence he drew his opinions.

Gelernter then misrepresents Germany’s decision to back the Austrian invasion of Serbia once its complicity in the murders of the Austrian Archduke and his wife became known: “She [Aus-

tria] consulted her friend Germany. Germany urged her to go right ahead and smash Serbia if she felt like it. On the topic of smashing undersize neighbors, Germans were always sympathetic.” This requires clarification: both Serbia and, more distantly, Serbia’s protector Russia were involved in the assassination that led to the Austro-Hungarian invasion. The Serb government under the Karageorgevich dynasty made no secret about its intention to break apart the Habsburgs’ multinational monarchy; and the German Imperial government tried initially to hold back the Austrian invasion, even after the Serbs had turned down an Austrian ultimatum to allow Austrians to enter Serbia in pursuit of anti-Austrian terrorist rings. Further-

more, it is not necessary to endorse all of the questionable policies pursued by the German government in the years preceding the War, such as launching a vast naval program intended to reduce English maritime supremacy, to recognize the limits of Gelernter's interpretations. He adds nothing to historical debates with his overly broad generalizations.

Gelernter's praise of Wilson is lavish: "no president spoke the language of the Bible, divine mission, and American Zionism more consistently than Woodrow Wilson"; and his "speeches make it clear that Americanism inspired his agonized, epochal decision to take America into war." It might be useful to note less flattering historical accounts. Walter Karp, Arthur Ekirch, Robert Higgs, and Murray Rothbard have all brought up the breaches of civil liberties, the government's incitements to violence against German Americans, and the distortions of information committed by Wilson's government even before it "took" our country into the war. It speaks well for the U.S. that such blatant tyranny produced by the war party may be harder to get away with now than in the past.

THE NEOCONSERVATIVES' APPEAL TO GLOBAL DEMOCRATIC IDEALISM IS NOT BASED ON ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY—ANY MORE THAN BUSH'S RHETORIC IS.

These objections aside, there is a compelling aspect of Gelernter's argument. The messianic, missionary view of America's role in the world that he passionately commends and traces back to the Puritans is not without historical basis. His attempts to find it in the current president and in a series of dead ones are fully justified. Although their intentions are diametrically opposed, Gelernter's hymn to messianic Americanism and Richard Gamble's study of the religious origins of Wilsonianism, *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation*, complement each other. One might also mention James Kurth's essays in *Orbis* out-

lining the stages of the "Protestant deformation" culminating in the confusion between messianic democracy and a Christian view of history. The difference of course is that in contrast to Gelernter, Kurth and Gamble are serious Presbyterians who are sorely distressed by the "fourth great religion"—one that has allegedly swallowed up Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. These scholars have moved beyond the consoling hope that Gelernter's American ideal is a mere passing aberration. Both are convinced that the seeds of political messianism go deep into the American Protestant past and that the "deformation" did not begin with the neoconservative ascendancy over the Republican Party.

For those who may not have noticed, American evangelicals are more solidly behind George W. Bush's efforts to missionize for democracy and human rights than are Catholics or Jews. But the neoconservatives' appeal to global democratic idealism is not based on orthodox Christianity—any more than Bush's rhetoric is. Gamble and Kurth both address a relevant question about American religious history: why is it that Protestant millenarianism has become

linked to American exceptionalism and to a warlike form of democracy? This fateful identification continues to operate, and it characterizes Protestant denominations that are not at all radical in American social politics. Protestant Republicans see no contradiction in favoring, on the one hand, family values and decentralized government and, on the other, global democratic wars beyond our borders. Gelernter calls attention to this strange combination of beliefs, and his book is thus useful for those who dissent from his value judgments.

There is a question suggested in his concluding chapter, "The New Covenant," which is well worth consid-

ering. Is it possible to sustain a religion of exportable democracy without a supportive religious culture? Gelernter laments "how knowledge of the Bible is collapsing, among young people especially," and how "morality can get no purchase without religion." But he also believes that "secularists" won't win, although we are never told why. All Gelernter provide is a "guess" that an American population that is mostly biblically illiterate, and one guided by militantly secularist educators and media celebrities, will turn in the opposite direction. But putting aside this leap of faith, we may still be justified in asking: can Gelernter's version of the "American religion" continue to shape American internationalism without its specifically Protestant ingredient?

My answer is "possibly yes." Modern figures whom Gelernter considers good Christians, such as Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy, were not noticeably orthodox nor, in Kennedy's case, particularly devout. Present Republican oratory about global democracy would not have embarrassed the Clinton administration, and it may be hoping for too much that this phraseology and its underlying vision will go away if the Democrats win the presidency in 2008. The Wilsonian matrix will not likely fade from public policy even if the explicitly secularist Democrats succeed the Republicans. Clinton's speeches about nation building, those of his secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, and Bush's Second Inaugural Address all share a common Wilsonian theme. Although Clinton's neoconservative critics may have scorned his ineffective "use of force," according to John Ehrman in *The Rise of Neoconservatism*, they never questioned his Wilsonian values. Gelernter's "fourth religion" may continue to thrive, even in a post-Judeo-Christian culture and even among those who are biblically unschooled. ■

Paul Gottfried is Raffensperger Professor of Humanities at Elizabethtown College and author, most recently, of The Strange Death of Marxism.

Snakes, Snails, and Puppy-Dog Tails

Hands are gnashed and teeth wrung over the current superiority of girls over boys in school. The probable consequences, both economic and social, are grave,

going far beyond cutesy gender-wars sparring. Why are boys crashing?

Some writers imply that boys are just, well, doltish and can't keep up. The evidence doesn't support the idea. In 1999—I pick that year because I then wrote a column on the question—the average math SAT score for boys was 531; for girls, 495. The respective verbal scores were 509 and 502. The number of boys scoring 800 in math, the highest possible score, was 4,815; of girls, 1,611. Girls with 800 verbal scores, 2,828; boys, 3,087. The disparity cannot well be explained by stupidity.

Nor is it that girls have gotten better. They have always done well in school. Yet boys are now doing much worse. Why? Perhaps because schools refuse to recognize that boys and girls are very different animals.

Girls co-operate; boys compete. Girls like order; boys, disorder. Girls like security; boys, adventure. Girls are not particularly physical; boys, relentlessly so.

I don't argue that either is better, only that the differences exist. Ignore them, and you get what we've got.

The schools today promote everything that boys aren't, don't want, and can't be. Boys are churning energy wads. They usually hate school. Girls, I think, do not. For boys the routine is horrible, the material boring, the enforced confinement to desks almost physically painful.

When I was in high school in King George County, Virginia, boys played

football at school, three hours of (full-contact) fast-break pickup basketball at the gym after school, and spent long afternoons swimming and canoeing in the river. We needed to burn off energy. It was a requirement for well being. The girls, by choice, did none of this.

Boys like to take chances, valuing freedom over security. My friends and I canoed into the Potomac in high waves with storm warnings out because it was fun, exciting, uncontrolled. Girls didn't. They could have, there being no restrictions on sales of canoes to girls, but they by choice did other things. Different animals.

Put boys in suburban moors where there is little physical to do; enact rules against hazardous sports such as tag and dodgeball; outlaw competition; tell them that everything they want to do is violent and evil; forbid them to swim without two lifeguards, a Coast Guard-approved life preserver, and sunblock—and you get miserable, frustrated boys who are likely to say the hell with it.

Today's schools are so heavily feminized that a boy feels as if he were in a convent. When I was in high school, roughly half of the teachers were men. Both sexes had teachers who understood them. It worked. Female teachers today, having little idea what makes boys tick, try to fit all into female roles. It doesn't work.

Further, boys suffer to the extent that schools value form over substance, neatness over knowledge, political correctness over thought, safety over every-

thing, and niceness, niceness, niceness. They have little patience with make-work projects that require cutting pictures from magazines. Their handwriting is typically poor. They aren't too good about getting homework in on time. Bright boys can deploy great intellectual intensity—watch one take apart his computer's motherboard—but they bore easily.

Remember that the dice are loaded against the highly intelligent, girls as well as boys. The teachers colleges get the dregs of the collegiate world, as has been shown time and again. When a teacher with an IQ of 95 faces a student at 150, they are virtually of different species. But girls are more—what is the word? Patient? Dutiful? Practical? Sally is likely to put up with a teacher she fully recognizes as an idiot and get a good grade. Billy is likely to bail.

A girl with high test scores will generally have good grades. A boy with high scores may come close to flunking out. (Guilty, your honor.) Different animals.

When boys do well on objective tests—IQ, SATs, GREs, National Merit, what have you—and also as engineers, scientists, entrepreneurs, and system programmers, but fail miserably in school, one might reasonably suspect that the problem is not boys but the schools.

If the schools want to teach boys (I don't think they do), they need to recognize that people come in two sexes; we might even value the difference. Let girls be girls and boys be boys. Hire staff evenly divided between the sexes. Don't impose on either sex behavior that is unnatural to it. Who knows? We could even essay common sense.

Nah, never happen. ■