

American Nations

Ezekiel 2:1-7

Whenever Americans celebrate the Fourth of July (or any other patriotic holiday), we are immersed in familiar rhetoric extolling the virtues of our country, our cultural heritage, and our common commitment to liberty, justice, and the American way of life. We take great pride in our nation’s revolutionary beginnings and of the exceptional nature of our commonwealth for nearly 240 years—as a “shining light upon a hill”—as a “beacon for democracy”—as a people embodying and defending the divine right of freedom against tyranny and oppression, “as a republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

Yet, for all of the glory, much of it occurs, ironically enough, against the discordant backdrop of endless civil, political, and racial unrest. This year, it’s the tears of African-American congregations suffering from endless violence, the fears incited by ISIL terrorists conspiring to harm our homeland, as well as the arrogant demagoguery of certain presidential candidates and even the gun-toting, stubborn resistance of Confederate flag-wavers, angry over the imposed political correctness of the mainstream. As much as we view this as the *United* States of America, there is less that actually unites us as a people than is commonly believed.

Oh, we may cherish the great American narrative that from our humble origins we are an immigrant people—a pilgrim people—yearning to be safe and free from tyranny, welcoming to all who seek refuge. But as historians continually remind us, this is a misreading of the past; from the earliest times of our republic, we have been a

fractured frontier of rivals, conjoined more by political convenience than common values and virtues.

The extent to which this holds true wasn't evident to me until recently, when I read Colin Woodard's acclaimed book, *American Nations*, where he explores the eleven distinct and separate regional cultures that have molded our national identity—cultures that arose throughout North America, including Mexico and Canada, but most of which are represented here in the makeup of the U.S.

Understanding regional histories helps explain the significant differences in worldviews between New England Yankees and those in the Deep South or Appalachia or the western Plains and why we are often more divided than united in America. As Woodard explains:

Americans have been deeply divided since the days of Jamestown and Plymouth. The original North American colonies were settled by people from distinct regions of the British Islands, and from France, the Netherlands, and Spain, each with their own religious, political, and ethnographic characteristics. Throughout the colonial period, they regarded one another as competitors—for land, settlers, and capital—and occasionally as enemies. ... Nearly all of them would seriously consider leaving the Union in the eighty-year period after Yorktown; several went to war to do so in the 1860s. All of these centuries-old cultures are still with us today, and have spread their people, ideas, and influence across mutually exclusive bands of the continent. There isn't and never has been one America, but rather several Americas. ¹

Frankly, this counters the popular notion in some circles that, once upon a time, when our nation's Founders were gathering in Philadelphia to form a more perfect union, that it was a "Golden Age" of American character, nobility, and moral principle—a gentile, idyllic Christian society envisioned by Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin, that

¹ Colin Woodard, *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*. Penguin, 2011, pg. 2.

time and circumstance (and unchecked liberalism and immigration) have eroded. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth.

The pre- and post-revolutionary periods were terribly conflicted and brutal; the Civil War and Reconstruction laid bare all our national sins and wounds. Over the past century, as much as it seems as if Americans have rallied together to defend our liberties and preserve our way of life, it's been closely associated with the imposition of Yankee values cultivated in Ivy League institutions, as well as Madison Avenue and Wall Street, that have dominated the mainstream culture in education, media, religion, and politics, lending the impression that a core and homogenous American identity and character even exists. As we've come to see, a Southern rebel or a lone maverick from Wyoming or a Tidewater cavalier or a first generation Latino might well dispute the presumption of that notion based on pride for their particular heritage.

Woodard stresses this point:

The notion of America having been a “melting pot” in which immigrants were transmuted into “Anglo-Protestant Americans” really refers to a Yankee remedy intimately tied to the folkways of a covenanted, utopia-building people [i.e., the Puritans] who were themselves almost entirely English in origin. ...Meanwhile, historians at Harvard, Yale, and other Yankee institutions were crafting a mythic “national” history [and identity] for [all] students to celebrate, which emphasized the centrality of the ... Pilgrim voyage, the Boston Tea Party, and Yankee figures such as the minutemen, Paul Revere, and Johnny Appleseed [with little reference made to the history and heroes of other regions]. ... In the Yankee paradigm, immigrants were to assimilate into the dominant culture which, from their point of view, was indeed characterized by the ... “Calvinist”...work ethic, self-restraint, a commitment to “common good,” and hostility to aristocratic institutions. ...It is fruitless to search for the characteristics of an “American” identity, because each nation has its own notion of what being an American should mean. ²

² Ibid., pg. 260, 261.

I find this very interesting. For those of us sitting here, we might be quite content with the Yankee worldview; it's how we largely have come to interpret the times in which we live and make judgments about what is right or wrong—for what is good for this country and what is not. We've done this with almost a colonial zeal and a claim to the moral high ground, rejecting the historic separation of races and classes and aristocratic values that were inherent to the original societies in the Tidewater region and the American South. We seek the common good and commonwealth, unlike the rugged individualists that once pioneered the far West or the Appalachia. We are strident advocates for progressive change, unlike our neighbors in the Midlands, who historically have been more tolerant of social and cultural differences (even strident ones), emphasizing neighborliness and allowing people to live as they choose.

In other words, the constellation of values that traditionally make up our Yankee culture—

- middle-class ethos;
- a strong Protestant work ethic;
- an emphasis on equal status and worth (something that has driven Yankee culture all over this country to support marriage equality long before anywhere else);
- an appeal to the common good over individual freedom and liberty;
- focusing on education and intellectual achievement, as well as individual good works, social activism, and the welfare of the community;

- a progressive desire to improve the world with mission-like commitment

—all of which came out of the regional values cultivated through our Yankee communities and institutions. Our forbears spread this culture from New England across the upper Midwest all the way to the Northwest and into most of the developing institutions of American society, including those in the South during Reconstruction and later in the Civil Rights era which, of course, met much resistance. This underscores why the federal government, along with northern Yankees, are distrusted, if not disdained, in many parts of this country. They feel the imposition of our Yankee culture on their way of life.

Naturally, the cultural values we aspire to are the lens through which we interpret Scripture and apply its moral teachings to our lives, for the simple reason that people tend to reflect the surroundings in which they live. Since a Yankee worldview has had a disproportionate influence upon American society, most of us have not had a heritage or identity that has been defined apart and distinct from the larger world. Consequently, the values that are expressed in the wider culture become reflected in our own choices and priorities.

As people of faith, we will then look for those same values as we discern them in the Bible or traditions of our faith and disregard those that contradict them. True to our Yankee sensibilities, we are drawn to good works, charitable outreach, a pursuit of justice, aiming to build a utopian community and society based on the teachings of Christ. Like the windows of this church, the difference between the outside world and what we experience inside is very little; the church

is not a separate society or minority subculture. In fact, we seek to make the larger society like the world we believe God envisions through our faith, which is why the Social Gospel has been more widely embraced here than anywhere. It's not surprising that the UCC, which is the preeminent New England Protestant church, reflects these emphases better than just about any.

However, if you live in other parts of the country, different emphases will be made. Evangelicalism, with its focus on personal salvation and biblical morality, has taken deep roots in settings where the local culture and heritage contrasts the prevailing mainstream in the U.S., such as in the Deep South, or in parts of the Midwest, Appalachia, or even among racial minorities and ethnic communities. Evangelicalism has also spread in areas which value individualism and autonomy, often associated with personal independence and freedom, such as in the Plains or far West.

Although Baptists originated mainly in New England, as they accompanied the pioneer movement across the country in the 19th century, they became dominant in regions that prize local autonomy or view the church as a refuge from a world which continues to move away from the cherished cultural traditions and social order of the past. In many cases, Baptists reflect their regional values more than those upon which Baptists were founded. Hence, Southern Baptists have helped preserve Southern culture as much as perpetuating the Christian tradition, while American Baptists, with our principal congregational strength in the Midwest, have become the most racially and theologically diverse denomination, largely owing to the cultural tolerance, political moderation, and liberty of conscience

reflected in Midwestern values. Though none of these regional distinctions are without exception or challenge, as a rule they hold true: there are many American nations, tribal identities, and cultural heritages that comprise what we often homogenize into a single patriotic dream, without recognizing that as much as we have things that bind us together, we have many more that can pull us apart. We are not one family with common bonds; we are many households living in a neighborhood—not unlike European countries and cultures.

Perhaps, for this reason, our text for today from Ezekiel 2 captures the essence of the United States more than we realize. Namely, we are a rebellious nation and a nation of rebels. Our ability to value and appreciate individual differences coupled with our inability to make all things uniform according to a common set of beliefs and values testifies to our collective angst, and yet also our interdependence and the need for any of us to consider the perspectives, challenges, and critiques directed toward us by others.

Ezekiel, as the text suggests, was called to prophesy against Judah because, like Israel, she had strayed from the covenantal relationship with God, failing to live up to the spirit of their founding constitution, i.e., the Torah. The prophet was directed to speak out and call them back to their original covenantal love. Even if he failed to do so, even if the people of Judah resisted his prophetic plea, he could not give up for, in time, his word would stand and, at some point, they would know a prophet was among them.

I wonder if the same thing holds true for us, as well. The challenge before us as Americans is, whose voice is prophetic in our

time and to whom might it be directed? In addition, is it a prophetic voice that comes simply out of the clash of cultures or regional differences, or is there a genuine moral challenge to us to value something more germane, more essential, to human existence?

This is critically important for us as we hear politicians and pundits speak to the great issues of our time. Do we not have to distinguish between what is morally right or wrong from that which is merely a difference in cultural heritage or values? What laws and policies should be federal mandates, subscribed to by all, and which should be left to individual states and regions to decide? Are there cultural traditions and regional worldviews that must be respected, allowing for differences, much as we allow for them between religions? How does one determine what is left to the individual conscience as opposed to that which should characterize an entire society? Does our Christian faith call for obedience to a uniform theology and code of conduct, or does it lead us to express toleration for differences and value for the views that contrast our own?

How does this all pertain to the conflicts inherent to racism and the Confederate flag, or marriage equality and religious liberty, or environmental protection and economic justice, or free markets and economic fairness, or gun control and the right to defend and protect, or expanding healthcare by law and respecting personal choice, or welcoming immigrants and protecting our borders, or valuing individual freedom relative to collective interests?

Those are some of the basic struggles we face as citizens of this nation, as people of faith rooted and engaged in it, and of those from various regions and cultures throughout this land who want the

country they love to reflect the values they hold dear. Whose voice is prophetic to us in these times? Is it from the North or the South, from the East or West; from the highest levels of society or from the grassroots? Are we motivated more by the values of our faith or those of our culture, region, or heritage? Whose vision of personal character and community do we follow? Whose hope for the future reflects our own?

That is where we are as a nation in the 21st century, much like we have been many American nations for over two hundred years. It's not unified, it's messy; we are both patriotic and rebellious; we are individuals and regions struggling to create a more perfect union. There is no romanticized myth of what America once was, but only a realistic measure of what we are now and what we might be in the future.

As the prophet Ezekiel reminds us, we are no more protected from our failures and stubbornness than were Israel and Judah, who felt they were exceptional—uniquely chosen and protected by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yet, their history often defied that dream. However, their persistent hope was in not being forgotten by the One who brought them into being and promised to redeem them, in times of prosperity or in periods of exile. Is that what we need to remember in this time and place? On this Independence weekend, may that promise be the enduring hope of all the American nations as well.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
5 July 2015