





## INTRODUCTION

WANDERING FOR MILES ALONG the narrow roads that thread their way among the modest farms and tiny villages of northeastern France, the modern pilgrim is unprepared for the dazzling spectacle of the American military cemetery of the Meuse-Argonne. Situated in a rural landscape that still bears the scars of the twentieth-century's domineering will to power, the massive cemetery blankets hundreds of perfectly manicured acres donated to the United States by a grateful France in 1918. A chapel stands at one end with a commanding view of tree-lined roads, tranquil gardens, and endless rows of thousands upon thousands of precisely aligned white crosses. Inside the chapel, a book of remembrance records the sentiments of guests, often simply saying, "*Merci pour la France.*" The ceiling and walls bear pious inscriptions promising that these men and their brave deeds will never be forgotten.

On rare sunny days in the otherwise sodden and chilly climate of this remote part of France, the marble crosses gleam with an arresting brilliance. They silently await the Judgment Day in solemn testimony to the American servicemen who died in the grim and bloody action along the Western Front, not far from the horror of Verdun, in the final autumn of the war. Scattered among the crosses are some that simply read, "Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God." But most provide the soldier's name, rank, home state, and date of death. Some



were killed as late as the very morning of the Armistice; others died of their wounds months later. No date of birth is given, however, obscuring just how young, how tragically young, most of these soldiers were when they fell. Despite the apparent uniformity and blended anonymity of this voiceless “democracy of the dead,” these crosses bear family names from Italy, Poland, Germany, France, the British Isles, Russia, and beyond—Europe’s sons returned to fight Europe’s war.

The story that follows recovers part of the reason these American soldiers lie buried in France. It is not a story of military tactics, innovative weaponry, or trench life. It is not primarily an account of diplomacy and politics—although diplomats and politicians appear in these pages. Rather, it is a story of ideas, of the deepest ideas regarding purpose and meaning, and the definition of national identity and destiny at a critical moment. It is not a story about the physical landscape of the First World War, but rather about the inner landscape of one prominent group of Americans and what they imagined to be true about their God, their nation, their enemies, and the unfathomable European War of 1914 to 1918. It is an attempt to map the geography of a set of ideas, to trace the use of the redemptive imagery of the cross of Christ to wage an uncompromising war for righteousness. It begins and ends with theology, and shows how one group of American pastors, theologians, seminary professors, and college presidents confronted some of the timeless problems of Christian theology in the context of total war.

The self-described “progressives” among America’s Protestant clergy at the turn of the twentieth century were well known in church circles and beyond for their advanced thinking on theology, politics, and foreign affairs. As they faced the prospect of a new century, these ministers and academics thought of themselves as broad-minded, humane, and cosmopolitan, in harmony with the very best scientific, political, and theological wisdom of the age. In short, they were among the “right thinking” leaders of their day. These reformers have since been labeled “liberal” or “modernist” by historians, but the word “progressive” suited their character and their times. It was the adjective they chose to describe their vision. They were eager participants in a world marked by material progress and technological efficiency and by an increasing moral rigor and earnestness in

domestic and foreign policy. The progressive clergy imagined themselves, their faith, and their nation as poised on the brink of opportunity, on the verge of an unprecedented chance to serve Humanity by spreading America's material, political, and spiritual progress.

But these clergy were also aware of standing between two worlds, as they would have described the sensation, between a receding order of tradition, conservatism, and reaction on the one hand, and an approaching order of reform, liberalism, and reconstruction on the other; between an intellectual obscurantism fraught with barbarism, depravation, and war arrayed against a coming clarity of thought that promised civilization, plenty, and peace. Within their own churches, these progressive ministers strove against theological traditionalism for the sake of a new Christianity, one that would make its peace with the modern world. The names of these clergy may have slipped from modern memory, yet they spoke for their generation's serious and urgent effort to adapt itself to the emerging world that was so quickly replacing the old.

Primarily, these religious progressives interpreted the First World War in light of their social gospel theology. The liberal clergy were not merely lackeys in the Wilson administration's attempts at social control, nor were they caught unaware and unprepared by the outbreak of the war; rather, these forward-looking clergy embraced the war as a chance to achieve their broadly defined social gospel objectives. In the same way that American imperialism at the turn of the century was, as historian William E. Leuchtenburg argued,<sup>1</sup> not a betrayal of domestic reform idealism but rather the expression of the same expansive, interventionist spirit on an international scale, so too the progressive clergy's enthusiasm for American participation in the Great War did not contradict their progressive theology. Their enthusiasm for the war was an acknowledged extension of their theological progressivism. They seized upon the war as an opportunity to reconstruct the churches, America, and the world according to the imperatives of the social gospel. Their peacetime crusade became a wartime crusade.

Judging by how many books and articles appeared during the war bearing such titles as "The War and Religion," and by the degree to which theological interpretations of the war permeated wartime political rheto-

ric, it is clear that the Great War struck a number of Americans first and foremost as a battle possessing transcendent meaning, as the knowable outworking of God's plan for humanity. The progressive clergy were quick to point out this significance and to advance their interpretation. Throughout the following study, the participants speak for themselves as much as possible. How they expressed themselves—the words and metaphors they habitually chose—reveals much about how they thought. Their language was shared by a large community in the church and beyond, appearing repeatedly in sermons, books, denominational magazines, and also, to a remarkable degree, in the secular press and in political speeches directed to a variety of audiences, all of whom were expected to respond in a predictable way to these sacred images. Their own words help open the interior world of the progressive clergy and reassemble the ideas they used to explain the war to themselves, to the American public, and to the world.

The title for this book comes from an essay by the distinguished twentieth-century British historian Herbert Butterfield. In his essay "The War for Righteousness," Butterfield argued that the horror of modern warfare is not attributable primarily to advanced industrial technology, as we might naturally assume, but rather to modern states' willingness to engage in ideological wars with no room for compromise or limited objectives. The brutal "Wars of Religion" that devastated Europe after the Protestant Reformation, Butterfield argued, were reincarnated in the twentieth century, when once again international contests were invested with transcendent meaning and transformed into absolute struggles between light and darkness. In 1914, he continued, each nation told its people "that our enemy is worse than the rest of human nature and that his wickedness demands utter destruction."<sup>2</sup> The progressive clergy contributed profoundly to this mentality of total war and played a vital role in turning at least their side of the Great War into a "war for righteousness," an ultimate spiritual battle to rid the earth of a pagan nation that impeded the progress of God's righteous kingdom.

## SOLDIERS OF THE CROSS

Redemptive imagery and wars for righteousness were by no means new to the American experience in the First World War. By 1914, the American identity and sense of national mission had accumulated and synthesized a range of doctrines, ideals, and metaphors assembled from Roman antiquity, the Old and New Testaments, Enlightenment rationalism, Romantic nationalism, and evolutionary naturalism. This stock of images and language was not always compatible, internally consistent, or coherent, but it was always ready to be drawn upon, reshaped, reused, expanded, and adapted—a treasury of powerful metaphors that helped Americans define themselves, their enemies, their purpose, and their future. With surprising consistency, though to varying degrees over time and with shifting emphases, Americans have been habitually drawn to language that is redemptive, apocalyptic, and expansive. Americans have long experienced and articulated a sense of urgency, of hanging on the precipice of great change, of living in the “fifth act” of history, as poet and philosopher George Berkeley famously wrote about the emerging American empire in the eighteenth century. They have fallen easily into the Manichean habit of dividing the world into darkness and light, Evil and Good, past and future, Satan and Christ. They have seen themselves as a progressive, redemptive force, waging war in the ranks of Christ’s army, or have imagined themselves even as Christ Himself, liberating those in bondage and healing the afflicted. From the time of the earliest colonial settlements, for good or ill, the metaphors of the cross of Christ and of the mission of His Church have been deeply embedded in the story of the American people and their relations with the rest of the world.

## THE PURITANS’ NEW ISRAEL

In many ways, America’s millennial enthusiasm is as old as the voyages of Columbus. As historian Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt makes clear, the Spanish empire invested its New World expeditions with messianic hope and with anticipations of the end of history, prophetic fulfillment, the universal dominion of Christ’s kingdom, and a return to paradise.<sup>3</sup> These motifs are more typically associated with the United States’ Puritan

forebears, however, and for good reason. Nevertheless, the infusion of Europe's westward advance with millennial fervency was not exclusively the work of England's most famous refugees. The colonists who ultimately settled British North America in the seventeenth century came from a variety of doctrinal and ecclesiastical backgrounds, often disagreeing sharply about how to please God. But as fellow Christians—Protestant Christians, typically, they shared clear assumptions about the nature and character of God, His way of working in the world, their relationship to the created order, the meaning of life, and their hope for the future. They disagreed about liturgy, translations of Scripture, ecclesiology, and the finer points of eschatology, but from the James River to Cape Cod, from the Atlantic Seaboard to the Appalachian Mountains, they entertained little doubt about God's presence and superintending purposes in the settlement of the New World. They believed in God's "special providence," as it was called, and in miracles, the righteous judgments of the moral law, the need to lead an exemplary life, the certainty of reward and punishment now and in the life to come, and the conviction that events here on earth are bound up inextricably with events in heaven. By these measures, American colonists were not notably different from the European neighbors they left behind.

Among the earliest settlers of the American wilderness, the Puritans of New England were animated by a powerful consciousness of who they were, what they had fled from, and the new world they were laboring to redeem and build for themselves and all mankind in North America. They were a people possessed by an unmistakable sense of mission and of being the objects of a divine covenant with all its attendant blessings and curses. The Puritans were set apart to be, as John Winthrop famously and enduringly labeled them, a "Citty upon a Hill" with the eyes of the world fixed upon them.<sup>4</sup> God entered into a literal new covenant with a new chosen people, called out of bondage in Egypt for a particular task at a special moment in redemptive history, escaping from a modern Pharaoh and his army across a great sea. Their election was confirmed by signs and wonders, by attesting miracles of deliverance and safety and provision. They were unshakably certain of God's calling. They fled from a corrupt Europe

and from an England bound in spiritual decline and apostasy. Or, to change the biblical metaphor, they were the Woman of the Book of Revelation (12: 14–17) who fled from the Dragon and escaped into the wilderness.<sup>5</sup>

The new world encountered by this chosen people was envisioned as both wilderness and Promised Land, barren desert and Canaan flowing with milk and honey, a trial to be endured and a captive land to be ransomed and possessed, a Babylon and a New Jerusalem. They found a wilderness to be crossed, transformed, and redeemed, a place populated by brutes of Hell, wild beasts, heathen darkness, barbarism, and modern Amalekites. The wilderness also symbolized the ever-present humbling possibility of spiritual wandering as the penalty of backsliding, of even the elect's propensity to disobedience, sin, and rebellion like the ancient Israelites under Moses. Nevertheless, the settlers came to build a New Israel, a new Mt. Zion, a new city of Jerusalem, a realm of light, safety, peace, purity, and prosperity, of both temporal blessing and abundant anticipation of eternal reward. As historian Sacvan Bercovitch summarizes the perspective of Puritan minister John Cotton, "America . . . was the new promised land, reserved by God for His new chosen people as the site for a new heaven and a new earth."<sup>6</sup>

One of the most striking features of the Puritan sense of mission was its "fusion of secular and sacred history," as Bercovitch emphasizes.<sup>7</sup> Whether or not these settlers intended to build a literal theocracy, they mentally inhabited a Holy Commonwealth; their worldview generally failed to distinguish between the City of Man and the City of God. As historian Ernest Lee Tuveson observes of the Puritans in his masterful *Redeemer Nation*, "they considered themselves in fact as advancing to the next step beyond the Reformation—the actual reign of the spirit of Christ, the amalgamation of the City of the World into the City of God."<sup>8</sup> Confident of their divine appointment, oriented toward their "errand," the Puritans fought to advance the Kingdom of Christ on Earth. Drawing habitually on the language and symbolism of the Old and New Testaments, the Puritans often portrayed themselves as soldiers of God. They were "troops of Christ's army," an invincible force marching under the leadership of their divine Captain, waging battle after battle in a campaign of conquest, expanding

Christ's realm and dominion and tearing down the walls of Babylon. They were engaged in a cosmic struggle being fought on the front lines in North America between Christ's Kingdom and the kingdom of the Antichrist.

The New England Puritans believed the curtain had opened on the last act of history, the fulfillment of all promise and hope and longing in a spectacular grand finale. Their age as a whole was one of expectation, both religious and secular. Back in England, Francis Bacon had recently proclaimed in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605)—and repeated more explicitly in his *Novum Organum* (1620)—the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy (Daniel 12:4) that “many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased.” The many voyages of the Age of Exploration and the intellectual curiosity of the Scientific Revolution had realized the prophet's vision.<sup>9</sup> Daniel was “clearly intimating,” Bacon wrote, “that the thorough passage of the world . . . and the advancement of the sciences, are destined by fate, that is, by Divine Providence, to meet in the same age.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, through the power of knowledge applied to nature, the Fall of man would be reversed, his dominion restored. From the scientific method “there cannot but follow an improvement in man's estate and an enlargement of his power over nature. For man by the Fall fell at the same time from his state of innocency and from his dominion over creation. Both of these losses however can even in this life be in some part repaired; the former by religion and faith, the latter by arts and sciences.”<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Cotton Mather promised that the Puritan calling anticipated “the *Generall Restoration of Mankind from the Curse of the Fall*, and the opening of [the last stage in] that Scheme of *the Divine Proceedings*, which was to bring a blessing upon all the *Nations of the Earth*.”<sup>12</sup> On the shores of New England, God was performing a unique work on behalf of his new covenant people. As Mather rejoiced,

This at last is the spot of *earth*, which the God of heaven *spied out* for the seat of such *evangelical*, and *ecclesiastical*, and very remarkable transactions, as require to be made an history; *here* 'twas that our blessed JESUS intended a *resting place*, must I say? or only an *hiding place* for those *reformed CHURCHES*, which have given him a little accomplishment of his eternal Father's promise unto him; to be, we hope, yet further accomplished, *of having the utmost parts of the earth for his possession?*<sup>13</sup>

Reflecting on this passage and others, literary historian David Lyle Jeffrey concluded that “in a fashion unprecedented in Christian cultural history American Puritan divines applied biblical promises about the coming millennium to America, as if New England had become a heavenly kingdom in the here and now.”<sup>14</sup>

Many years later, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne captured a parallel attitude in the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale’s Election Day Sermon:

His subject, it appeared, had been the relation between the Deity and the communities of mankind, with a special reference to the New England which they were here planting in the wilderness. And, as he drew towards the close, a spirit as of prophecy had come upon him, constraining him to its purpose as mightily as the old prophets of Israel were constrained; only with this difference, that, whereas the Jewish seers had denounced judgments and ruin on their country, it was his mission to foretell a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord.<sup>15</sup>

These “newly gathered people of the Lord” who fled to North America believed they were completing the Protestant Reformation that had begun on the continent of Europe a century before, been momentarily thwarted in Stuart England (a “hopeless retardation,” Mather complained<sup>16</sup>), and was soon to be accomplished in the New World. The earliest American settlers sensed that they were performing on a world stage, acting out a drama that would ultimately affect all mankind. World renewal would flow from the work begun in America. Settlement marked the first light of dawn, the mere anticipation of the full light of day, of the coming of the new heavens and the new earth. The Puritans’ sense of mission expanded rapidly in the seventeenth century, from that of a remnant people fleeing oppression, to an outpost in the New World of the spreading Reformation, to a continental vision to redeem North America, and finally to “a community of visible saints charged with a world-redemptive mission.”<sup>17</sup> Worldwide renovation would begin in America—the Fall reversed, dominion restored, the earth renewed, paradise regained. The Puritans were living out an apocalyptic experience, expecting the imminent fall of Antichrist. The “man of sin” was about to be cast down.<sup>18</sup> These settlers

lived on the edge of a great transformation; history raced toward the consummation of the ages.

#### THE REVOLUTION

In the eighteenth century, the Puritans' descendants adapted and secularized their inherited stock of metaphors. "In effect," writes Bercovitch of the Puritans' ambitious "Yankee heirs," "they incorporated Bible history into the American experience—they substituted a regional for a biblical past, consecrated the American present as a movement from promise to fulfillment, and translated fulfillment from its meaning within a closed system of sacred history into a metaphor of limitless secular improvement."<sup>19</sup> The Puritan errand became secularized as temporal progress, social amelioration, material well-being, and the regeneration of society. This attitude was evident in an emerging political figure like John Adams, who, in 1765, confided to his diary, "I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth."<sup>20</sup>

The evocative, volatile, redemptive language of Puritan New England flowed into the following century, ready to be applied to the Revolution and the birth of a nation. The political, constitutional, and economic conflict between Britain and its colonies was often framed by ministers as a new engagement in the ongoing struggle between the New Israel and Egypt or Assyria. Patriots continued to identify America as "Zion," as "Jerusalem," as the "Kingdom of God," and as the Woman fleeing the Dragon. As historian Nathan Hatch observes, "The cosmic interpretation of the conflict—God's elect versus Antichrist—appeared as a significant pattern in the intricate tapestry of ideas used by New England clergymen to explain the war's purpose."<sup>21</sup>

Among the most frequently cited examples of wartime political sermons is Samuel Sherwood's "The Church's Flight into the Wilderness" from early 1776. Evidently, Sherwood was convinced he was witnessing the literal fulfillment of the prophecies of the book of Revelation. He believed the world was fast approaching the universal reign of peace and

righteousness as America vanquished Britain, the current embodiment of the Dragon. He prayed

that the dragon will be wholly consumed and destroyed; that the seat and foundation of all tyranny, persecution and oppression, may be for ever demolished; that the horns, whether civil or ecclesiastical, may be knocked off from the beast, and his head receive a deadly wound, and his jaws be effectively broken; that peace, liberty and righteousness might universally prevail; that salvation and strength might come to Zion; and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ might be established to all the ends of the earth.<sup>22</sup>

At war's end, Ezra Stiles, president of Yale College, vividly pictured victorious America as "God's New Israel" in a sermon preached before Connecticut's General Assembly.<sup>23</sup> He depicted George Washington as none other than Joshua commanding the armies of the Children of Israel and leading them into the Promised Land. In language typical of the revolutionary mind at work, moreover, he spoke of his awareness of the acceleration of time and the compression of events: "We live in an Age of Wonders. We have lived an age in a few years. We have seen more wonders accomplished in eight years than are usually unfolded in a century."<sup>24</sup> With the exuberance of Francis Bacon from nearly two centuries before, he proclaimed that "that prophecy of Daniel is now literally fulfilling—there shall be an universal traveling 'too [sic] and fro, and knowledge shall be increased.' This knowledge will be brought home and treasured up in America: and being here digested and carried to the highest perfection, may reblaze back from America to Europe, Asia and Africa, and illumine the world with TRUTH and LIBERTY." America's universal redemptive role could not have been more clearly expressed. But the original Puritan expectation of spiritual salvation is notably missing, replaced by a gospel of science, the "empire of reason," accelerated progress, the "unfettered mind," emancipation from the past, "unbounded freedom," and humanitarian benevolence.<sup>25</sup> This sort of secularized sermonizing is evidence of what Hatch marks as a "profound shift in emphasis [as] the religious values that traditionally defined the ultimate goal of apocalyptic hope—the conversion of all nations to Christianity—became diluted with, and often subordinated to, the commitment to America as a new seat of liberty."<sup>26</sup>

The predominance of political and earthly values over the spiritual and eternal was evident among other clergymen as well. An earlier sermon preached in the midst of the war by Abraham Keteltas at the First Presbyterian Church of Newburyport, Massachusetts, while not necessarily representative in every way of the thousands preached during the crisis, reveals further doctrinal imperatives in America's political theology, creedal affirmations that would persist right through the First World War and beyond. Keteltas identified the "cause of God" as the "cause of universal righteousness" and then unhesitatingly and seamlessly as the "cause of this much injured country." Keteltas assured his congregation that God's activity in history, his providence and intentions, can be read in the pattern of secular history, can be clearly seen and properly, accurately, confidently interpreted by observation of the rise and fall of nations, making success the mark of God's favor. Bypassing the troubling implications of this reasoning, Keteltas pressed on to articulate an outward-directed, universal mission as the work of a chosen nation, struggling in a righteous cause, and battling apocalyptically on the brink of the "paradise of God":

We are contending for the rights of mankind, for the welfare of millions now living, and for the happiness of millions yet unborn. If it is the indisputed [*sic*] duty of mankind, to do good to all as they have opportunity, especially to those who are of the household of faith, if they are bound by the commandment of the supreme law-giver, to love their neighbor as themselves, and do to others as they would that others should do to them; then the war carried on against us, is unjust and unwarrantable, and our cause is not only righteous, but most important: It is God's own cause: It is the grand cause of the whole human race, and what can be more interesting and glorious. If the principles on which the present civil war is carried on by the American colonies, against the British arms, were universally adopted and practiced upon by mankind, they would turn a vale of tears, into a paradise of God: whereas opposite principles, and a conduct, founded upon them, has filled the world with blood and slaughter, with rapine and violence, with cruelty and injustice, with wretchedness, poverty, horror, desolation, and despair: We cannot therefore doubt, that the cause of liberty, united with that of truth & righteousness, is the cause of God.<sup>27</sup>

Consistently, Keteltas identified backsliding Britain with the "cause of the devil" and defined the Revolutionary War as "the cause of heaven against hell" and "against the prince of darkness."<sup>28</sup> In an ecstasy of prophetic vi-

sion, Keteltas finally linked the American cause to the atonement on Calvary. In its fight for truth, righteousness, benevolence, liberty, and other limitless ideals, the American cause “is a cause, for which the Son of God came down from his celestial throne, and expired on a cross—it is a cause, for the sake of which, your pious ancestors forsook all the delights and enjoyments of England, that land of wealth and plenty, and came to this once howling wilderness, destitute of houses, cultivated fields, the comforts and conveniences of life. This is a cause, for the prosperity of which, millions of saints are praying, and our gracious High Priest is interceding.”<sup>29</sup> These confident definitions of America, the foe, the cause and its significance, so familiar from the Puritans and wrapped in millennial, global, apocalyptic intensity and finality, continued to weave their way through the fabric of the American imagination for generations to come.

#### THE ENLIGHTENMENT

While the Puritan settlers had clearly desired to spread the gospel as they busily reversed the Fall, by the time of the Revolution it is fair to ask what “converting the world” had come to mean. Was the good news now a proclamation of an enlightened world of political and economic liberty, freedom of conscience and worship, and unlimited scope for unfettered human reason? Regardless of how many Americans anticipated an earthly redemption through the agency of the Revolution, many Enlightenment thinkers fully expected the American cause to usher in a secular, global redemption. The American myth and the definition of its mission were not just the product of its own history and principles, but also of the expectations—often very flattering expectations—thrust upon the new nation by the *philosophes* and other European intellectuals.

French immigrant Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, author of the celebrated *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), helped redefine American exceptionalism. Crèvecoeur had fought in Canada in the French and Indian War, labored for a time as a farmer in the Hudson River Valley, and then returned to Europe in 1781.<sup>30</sup> From Europe, he envisioned a new sort of escape from bondage and spiritual enemies. No longer pictured as fleeing from the Puritans’ Dragon or Egypt, Crèvecoeur’s “new man” fled from the past and its hateful institutions, finding in America “no

aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion”—the Enlightenment hope of emancipation from the tyranny of both prince and priest. America was the land not of the dead past but of the vital future and freedom and material progress. In America, the faith of a Voltaire or Addison in the power of commerce to bring every former foe into amicable relations through the miracle of the marketplace was being realized, along with a Lockean free-market of ideas and beliefs. The egalitarianism of the melting pot’s “mixture of blood” had ended Europe’s centuries’-old hostilities.<sup>31</sup> The redemptive language in Crèvecoeur’s vision of the future is unmistakable. America meant regeneration, newness, resurrection, and the birth of a new man, stripped of the past and ready to start the world over.<sup>32</sup> All the nations of the earth would be blessed by this new hope:

Here the individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the East; they will finish the great circle.<sup>33</sup>

An even more radical role in the impending world renewal was projected onto the young United States by such Enlightenment figures as Richard Price in England and Condorcet and Turgot in France. For most radical Enlightenment ideologues, the past was something from which to be emancipated. At best, the past imposed a sort of tutelage on a world still in its minority; at worst and more typically, the past chained the world in fetters, bound it in slavery, or lulled it to sleep in ignorance. The past was an obstacle to be overcome, not a precious legacy to be conserved. In the Enlightenment imagination, medieval Europe (according to the three-fold pattern of history habitual to the eighteenth century and seemingly impossible to shake off) was a time and place of superstition, error, barbarity, violence, darkness, and poverty. But the radical Enlightenment offered deliverance from the corruption and stagnation of the past and promised universal benevolence, peace, prosperity, liberty, equality, and reason. Above all, the glorious future would be rid of the pestilence of kings and priests.

Managing to strike all of these notes, Richard Price delivered his “Discourse on the Love of Our Country” in 1789 to mark the hundredth anniversary of the Glorious Revolution. Price praised the French Revolution and spoke with apocalyptic expectancy of world emancipation. He identified France as the Christ-Nation, quoting the prayer of Simeon over the Christ child and applying it to France.<sup>34</sup> Five years earlier, however, Price had already pronounced the same benediction over the American Revolution.<sup>35</sup>

True to Enlightenment presuppositions, Price saw America’s victory over Britain as the harbinger of “universal liberty” and of the “rights of mankind.” American independence opened a “new era in the history of mankind,” bringing rapid progress, amelioration of the human condition, and the advancement of Reason, the seat of an empire of “liberty, science and virtue” that would spread over the whole world. America was the world’s political messiah, characterized in ways similar to France a few years later. “Perhaps I do not go too far when I say,” Price wrote, “that, next to the introduction of Christianity among mankind, the American revolution may prove the most important step in the progressive course of human improvement.” At least he had the modesty to say “perhaps” and to assign American independence second place behind the Incarnation. America occupied a special place in providential, redemptive history. Americans were a sort of chosen people in whom, Price claimed appropriating God’s covenantal promise to Abraham, “*all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*” Repeating the now familiar refrain from Francis Bacon and Ezra Stiles, he interpreted events in America as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy: “*many will run to and fro and knowledge [will] be increased.*”<sup>36</sup>

Price and the Enlightenment in general placed upon America an extraordinary burden of hope and offered Americans an enticing, secularized affirmation of their already expansive self-understanding. With echoes all the way back to Virgil, America was assigned the redemptive role of “the last universal empire upon earth”—the “empire of reason and virtue” and permanent peace.<sup>37</sup> This exaggerated expectation would reverberate all the way down to Woodrow Wilson’s war message in 1917 in which he proclaimed that America intervened for the sake of “a universal

dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.”<sup>38</sup> Before that defining moment came, however, the light of America’s self-understanding was refracted through yet more ideological prisms.

#### ROMANTIC NATIONALISM

In the mid-nineteenth century, the American redemptive myth, as inherited from the Puritans and reconfigured by the Revolutionary generation on both sides of the Atlantic, was further elaborated by varieties of Romantic nationalism and utopianism. In his brilliant satire, *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote of the delusion of Brook Farm’s “little army of saints and martyrs” that they “had taken up [the Pilgrims’ high enterprise], and were carrying it onward and aloft, to a point which they never dreamed of attaining.”<sup>39</sup>

Hawthorne’s friend and fellow New England novelist Herman Melville developed this theme from another vantage point, “carrying it onward and aloft” to the point of identifying America as the world’s “political messiah” engaged in “unbounded philanthropy.” In an extended section from his novel *White-Jacket* (1850), Melville captured, in the eccentric voice of his seafaring narrator, the persistence, reworking, and expansion of the myth of the Puritan New Israel:

Escaped from the house of bondage, Israel of old did not follow after the ways of the Egyptians. To her was given an express dispensation; to her were given new things under the sun. And we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. Seventy years ago we escaped from thrall; and, besides our first birth-right—embracing one continent of earth—God has given to us, for a future inheritance, the broad domains of the political pagans, that shall yet come and lie down under the shade of our ark, without bloody hands being lifted. God has predestinated, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear. We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours. . . . Long enough have we been skeptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in *us*, if we would but give utterance to his promptings. And let us always remember that with ourselves,

almost for the first time in the history of earth, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy; for we can not do a good to America but we give alms to the world.<sup>40</sup>

As Schulte Nordholt aptly comments on this passage, “Inherent in a text of such exaggeration is a projection of the millennium, the golden future which grows beneath our hands. But such overstrained enthusiasm entails crossing well-defined boundaries both of orthodoxy and of human limitation.”<sup>41</sup> It would require many years of harsh experience before many Americans confronted and reckoned with these boundaries, before many realized with Hawthorne that earthly utopias still need prisons and cemeteries, still face sin and mortality.<sup>42</sup> In the meantime, however, America’s complicated messianic identity flourished. Liberal theologian Horace Bushnell likened the Puritan’s divine errand to the Magi’s quest in search of the Christ child, and America to a sort of manger for the new Christ: “Our sublime fathers had a high constructive instinct, raising them above their age and above themselves. God made them founders of a social state under forms appointed by Himself. This was the star of the East that guided them thither. They came as to the second cradle-place of a renovated Messiahship. . . .”<sup>43</sup>

Bushnell and his generation thought and wrote within the larger context of the spirit of their optimistic times. “Seldom,” observes historian Robert Johannsen, “did [the idea of mission] attain such wide acceptance as in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, when the belief that the American people had been chosen to fulfill certain high and lofty purposes became a dominant theme in their democratic faith.” “Born of revolution,” he continues, “free from the restraints of tradition, and enjoying a unique geographic position, the young United States seemed to embody the hopes and ideals of men everywhere.”<sup>44</sup> And these hopes and ideals, political, religious, moral, and economic, would not be achieved merely here and now for the American people but for all humanity and for all time.

The expansive temper of antebellum America was typified by such champions of Manifest Destiny as Democratic newspaper editor John L. O’Sullivan. His writing was filled with Romanticism’s restlessness, bound-

lessness, vitality, and cult of originality. In an influential editorial, “The Great Nation of Futurity,” O’Sullivan rejoiced that America was disconnected from the past and from every nation.<sup>45</sup> Americans were a people without an ancestry. America was an original nation, a new thing on the earth, and “connect[ed] . . . with the future only”—“*the great nation of futurity*.” O’Sullivan carried over the Enlightenment formula that the past was steeped in aristocracy, monarchy, and privilege while the future belonged to democracy, equality, and freedom. “Unsullied by the past,” America was ready in the 1830s to advance into the virgin land of the open, boundless future. “We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march?”<sup>46</sup>

Typical of the rhetorical sacralization of the nation-state increasingly common in Europe at the time, especially in Italy, Germany, France, and among Poland’s sentimental friends and exiles, O’Sullivan transformed America into a new Christ. Claiming for his nation the promise of Christ to His Church in the gospels, O’Sullivan exulted that America would champion its doctrine of equality and guarantee that “the gates of hell”—the powers of aristocracy and monarchy—“shall not prevail against it.” “In its magnificent dominion of space and time,” moreover, “the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High—the Sacred and True,” a national “congregation” dedicated to the gospel of equality and brotherhood, proclaiming “peace and good will amongst men.” The blessing and hope of the Incarnation announced in these tidings, however, had been loosed from their theological moorings and transported far from their orthodox meaning and intention:

We must [march] onward to the fulfillment of our mission—to the entire development of the principle of our organization—freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, universality of freedom and equality. This is our high destiny, and in nature’s eternal, inevitable decree of cause and effect we must accomplish it. All this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man—the immutable truth and beneficence of God.<sup>47</sup>

One of the most famous religious spokesmen for the American frontier at the time of O'Sullivan's secular gospel was the Reverend Lyman Beecher, head of a remarkable clan of preachers and reformers that included Edward Beecher, Henry Ward Beecher, Catherine Beecher, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. He witnessed American history from the Revolution to the Civil War. In his rousing 1835 speech, "A Plea for the West," Beecher captured his generation's millennial hope and expectation of earthly renovation.<sup>48</sup> His Romantic imagination seemed to slip all bounds as he spoke, and he sensed the same compression and acceleration of time that had stirred the revolutionaries of his childhood. As an epigraph to his speech he placed Isaiah 64:8: "Who hath heard such a thing? who had seen such things? Shall the earth be made to bring forth in one day? or shall a nation be born at once?"

Beecher's vision was unconstrained. He expected nothing less than for America "to lead the way in the moral and political emancipation of the world."<sup>49</sup> Sounding closer to the radical Enlightenment than to his Puritan ancestors, he predicted that through American inspiration "the government of force will cease, and that of intelligence and virtue will take its place; and nation after nation cheered by our example, will follow in our footsteps, till the whole earth is free." From out of a united America, East and West, will flow a flood of "benevolence into that river which is 'to make glad the city of our God.'"<sup>50</sup>

Other writers carried this imperative for world renewal even further, expecting that the United States might even have to intervene in Europe to right wrongs and liberate captives. A remarkable passage from an 1853 article in the *Presbyterian Quarterly Review* expressed this willingness to wage war on the side of the political messiah: "On the fields of Europe, among the rotten systems, reeking with lies and oppression, and in regions red with the blood of saints, the lines may be closed up, and we of the western world be forced to take sides, or let the issue for another long cycle go by default. The battle of Armageddon is yet to be fought." Tuveson cites these lines as a haunting anticipation of American intervention in the First World War and as part of the psychological preparation of the American people for the Armageddon of the Civil War and then the Great War.<sup>51</sup>

While generally more restrained than the Puritans' Yankee descendants by a sense of man's depravity and the limitations imposed by man's createdness, some segments of the South exhibited a similarly virulent form of romantic nationalism. On the eve of the Civil War, South Carolina Fire-eater Robert Barnwell Rhett cited the continued threat from the North to the Southern states' peace and safety and proposed to dissolve the existing union and form a new confederation. He connected the yearnings of the Southern people to the nationalist movements underway in Scotland, Ireland, and vanished Poland and to Italy's struggle for unification and self-government.<sup>52</sup> In an Independence Day speech in 1859, Rhett proclaimed the South's "restless energy," dissatisfaction with boundaries, irrepressible urge to expand, and "high mission" to help civilize the world. Rhett could not have more consciously identified his people's cause with the spirit of the age:

There seems to be an irrepressible desire amongst all nations to extend their limits and their power. *Expansion is their law.* The lust for plunder or fame which stimulated an ALEXANDER and a GENGHIS KHAN, has long since given way to a system of colonial incorporation. By this means more barbarous peoples are civilized and improved, and the more civilized nations have become, the more intense seems to be their desire for expansion. At this moment the greatest conquerors are the most civilized nations of the world. France seeks expansion in Algeria and Egypt, Russia in Turkey and Upper Asia, the United States over this continent, and Great Britain all over the world. The restless energy which knowledge and civilization imparts, will not be satisfied with limits, but spreads abroad its eager enterprise and dominion. It is the destiny of human nature; and the Almighty may have imparted this desire for expansion to nations, in order that civilization and his true religion may be extended. The Caucasian race is not only to be the masters but the spiritual pastors of the world. As the Jews extirpated the heathen nations around them by God's command, so the weaker races may be destined to perish or to fall beneath the subjugation and tutelage of the superior races of the world. With no people on the earth is this policy of expansion more necessary than with the people of the southern States.<sup>53</sup>

Within two years of this speech, days after the first shots had been fired on Ft. Sumter, Henry Ward Beecher—son of Lyman Beecher and

pastor of Plymouth Church, Brooklyn—explicitly linked the Union cause with European romantic nationalism. Preaching at Plymouth Church on April 14, 1861, and taking as his text Exodus 15:15 (a reference to the liberation of Canaan from hands of the ungodly), Beecher identified the American cause as “liberty here, and liberty everywhere, the world over.” Like the Fire-eater Rhett, he looked for inspiration to an awakened Italy, Hungary, and Poland, and, unlike Rhett, to the emancipation of the serfs in Russia. “We, too,” he declared, “have a right to march in this grand procession of liberty. By the memory of the fathers; by the sufferings of the Puritan ancestry; by the teaching of our national history; by our faith and hope of religion; by every line of the Declaration of Independence, and every article of our Constitution; by what we are and what our progenitors were,—we have a right to walk foremost in this procession of nations toward the bright future.”<sup>54</sup> Like Christ in Gethsemane, he claimed, America had asked, “Let this cup pass from us!” But the war came, America’s Calvary, and the nation was “called to suffer for our faith.” “We shall be called to the heroism of doing and daring,” he continued, “and bearing and suffering, for the things which we believe to be vital to the salvation of this people.” In a direct appropriation of messianic promises from the book of Genesis, he reassured his congregation that “the scepter shall not depart.”<sup>55</sup> The political messiah would prevail.

A decade later, speaking at the time of the Franco-Prussian War and sympathizing with a French nation “humbled” in a spectacle not seen since “Christ was lifted up on Calvary,” Beecher again reminded his Plymouth congregation of God’s plan for America in the providential work of world benevolence. Praising the fabulous growth of American power, wealth, opulence, and glory, Beecher believed that the nation by God’s direction bore “a burden of humanity that its weal or woe will be like an eternal weal or woe, infinite, endless.” Sounding more like Caesar than Christ, he prayed, “May God give us magnanimity and power and riches, that we may throw the shadow of our example upon the poor, the perishing, and the ready-to-be-destroyed, for their protection.” Calling down a curse on anyone who would advocate war except for defense, however, Beecher cautioned that America had “no war that we want to wage except the war for righteousness in ourselves.”<sup>56</sup>

The victorious Union had, of course, recently waged a “war for righteousness” against the South. But a new generation of American clergy, inspired by remnants of their Puritan heritage, the boundless promises of the Enlightenment, the aggressive Romantic nationalism of Bushnell and Beecher, and the emerging Darwinian naturalism of their own day, launched a new crusade. They longed to see for themselves “the glory of the coming of the Lord” and enlisted in God’s ever-marching army in a new war for righteousness, first against Spain in 1898 and then in Europe from 1917 to 1918.

#### THE RISE OF THE MESSIANIC NATION

America’s anointment as the world’s political messiah did not end when demobilized troops returned from Europe in 1919. It did not end with America’s opposition to the Treaty of Versailles, nor with America’s refusal to join the League of Nations. The cumulative product of generations of reflection, experience, and anticipation, the American identity reached too deep and far to have been uprooted in a moment of supposed renunciation. Transcending party politics and most ideological boundaries, nearly all of the language of universality and emancipation, of the “city on a hill” and the world’s rebirth, of light and dark, Messiah and Armageddon, reverberates down to the present moment. Like Woodrow Wilson before them, few modern presidents have been able to resist the allure of America’s global redemptive consciousness.<sup>57</sup> In the 1940s, Franklin Roosevelt planned for a future refounded on four freedoms, freedoms that would prevail “everywhere in the world.” In the fourth of these universal freedoms, freedom from fear, he anticipated a day when “no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.” In countless speeches from the 1960s through the 1980s, moreover, Ronald Reagan reached back to the earliest metaphors of America’s “divine destiny” to reaffirm the nation’s special calling as a “city on a hill.”<sup>57</sup> Combining the Puritan errand with the Enlightenment dream of earthly regeneration, he also embraced Tom Paine’s longing to “begin the world over again.” And on September 11, 2002, George W. Bush, speaking with the colossus of the Statue of Liberty behind him, called America the “hope of all mankind” and appro-

priated the words of John 1:5 as if they described not just the Incarnation of Christ but the mission of the United States: “And the light shines in the darkness; and the darkness will not overcome it.” To one degree or another and with varying motives and consequences, each of these men continued to speak of the United States as if it were the *Salvator Mundi*, following a pattern of thought that has endured for more than four centuries.

Given the troubling history of this tendency of the American imagination, however, especially as it played out in the Great War, it is worth returning to the sobering poem that serves as this book’s epigraph. In “The English Graves,” G. K. Chesterton ponders the meaning of the fates of millions of “simple men” who died far from the humble, narrow homes they had known. He was, of course, referring to his fellow countrymen, but his words apply almost as poignantly to the American soldiers of the First World War who lie buried in France, who fought under their nation’s flag but were told they were saving the world.