

# AMERICAN DREAM, AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

An Oration

by  
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In America the ideals of freedom and liberty have been realized more fully than in any other time in history. Many, however, are beginning to feel the squeeze of the iron hand clothed in a velvet glove.

Faced with this situation, we are tempted to ask why we must struggle these days to keep our freedoms. But a more central question is, how did America ever establish a free country wherein a people could boast of not only the right to freedom but also the right to openly challenge the actions of the state? The answer has its roots in the traditional religion of the American people.

Harvard professor Harvey Cox wrote in The Seduction of the Spirit:

“Ultimately a people’s religion, no matter how it has been composed, becomes that people’s own ‘soul.’ ....When the ‘soul’ departs, as mortals have known since the beginning of time, the body soon dies too.”

The soul of the American people has been Judeo-Christian theism. It once provided Americans with a common morality that allowed individual freedom within its constraints - that common morality no longer exists in contemporary American society.

From those who crossed the Atlantic on the Mayflower up to the modern television evangelists, Christianity has been the main religious stream flowing through the American consciousness. As such, it has served as a de facto establishment of religion in America. This is true no matter how many attempts have been made to dis-establish it. Even in contemporary secular America, shadowy vestiges of the traditional religion remain. These are expressed largely through the civil religion and its attendant public affirmations of the belief in God and the Bible.

Much of modern Christianity, because of its shallowness and devalued spirituality, differs significantly from many Christian experiences of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This modern lack of spiritual vigor renders many of today’s Christians nearly powerless to influence contemporary American culture.

Yet Christianity was not always so ineffectual. Early American Christianity profoundly affected social institutions as the natural consequence of its dynamic spirituality.

However, Christianity no longer has much impact on major American social institutions. The very soul of America, as Cox notes, seems to be atrophying. Thus, the body may soon die also.

America began with a dream, a dream greatly shaped and informed by Christianity. This dream, the American dream, is what has made the rest of the world look to America in hope. Today, the American dream is portrayed as mundanely, for example, as the desire to own a home. However, what is the real meaning of the American dream?

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