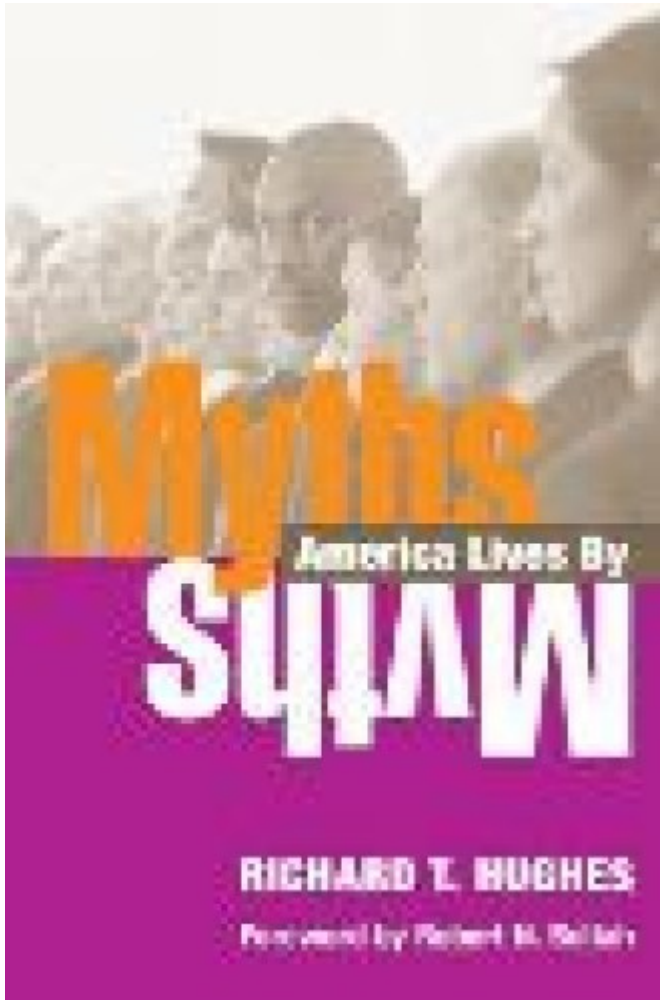


A 'chosen people'

By [Daniel Born](#) in the [January 13, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Myths America Lives By

Richard T. Hughes
University of Illinois Press

Without the myths that form its spiritual “glue” the United States would disintegrate, argues historian Richard Hughes. Hughes gives these myths five easy-to-remember

labels: that Americans are “the chosen people,” and that America is “nature’s nation,” “the Christian nation,” “the millennial nation” and “the innocent nation.” “Contrary to colloquial usage,” he says, “a myth is not a story that is patently untrue. Rather, a myth is a story that speaks of meaning and purpose, and for that reason it speaks truth to those who take it seriously.” Hughes rebuffs citizens and scholars who can muster only cynicism in regard to America’s myths. He believes that antipatriotic unbelievers, the “fundamentalists of the left, who can find no good in America whatsoever,” actually pose a danger to the republic.

As a more careful thinker than these opening histrionics might suggest, Hughes knows that the glue of myth, which helps bond communities, sometimes has toxic side effects. He understands that this mythical framework has often been as much about exclusion as inclusion—with the result that many African-Americans do not take an altogether sanguine view of it. In order to address such concerns, Hughes has structured many of his chapters to include a minority opinion alongside more mainstream thinking. He realizes that myths function most effectively when they remain “invisible,” working at an “unconscious” level in their adherents.

However, as a serious scholar who exposes the frequently shattering consequences of the embodiment of these myths, Hughes has more in common with the cynics than he is willing to admit. This becomes especially apparent in his discussion of the myth that America is the millennial nation. Here he develops a lengthy treatment of the doctrine of manifest destiny’s impact on the unfortunate Native Americans, Filipinos and Mexicans who were in the path of white America’s expansionist zeal during the latter half of the 19th century. By the 1840s manifest destiny emerged as America’s “full-blown civic faith.” Hughes’s summary of the policies carried out under this conviction culminates with an account of the 1890 massacre of 350 defenseless Sioux men, women and children at Wounded Knee. The dead and dying were carried into an Episcopal mission shortly after Christmas, where a banner above the pulpit declared, “Peace on earth, good will to men.”

This chapter demonstrates Hughes’s method: he chronicles specific U.S. policies and actions that grew out of the “myths America lives by.” But, curiously, although Hughes states that manifest destiny is itself a distillation of the first four myths—an “absolutizing” of them—this does not shake his overall faith that such myths contain a salutary core. Having courageously faced the myths’ most damaging consequences, Hughes wants us to look past those consequences to find an affirmative hosannah.

Not surprisingly, Martin Luther King, one of the voices from the minority report, stands as the most convincing example of this affirmation. Here was a preacher and political leader who did appeal to the myth of the Christian nation—or at least to an idea of its conscience. When King exhorted the nation to a higher standard of justice, his message gained its power precisely from its rootedness in biblical imagery and language (and from King’s theatrical positioning of himself in front of the Lincoln Memorial as he delivered the message). King’s political power could not be disentangled from his theological confession.

Hughes thinks that only one of the five myths deserves wholesale rejection: that of “the innocent nation.” He says that it has no “redemptive value,” and that it “tells no meaningful story because it is finally grounded in self-delusion.” He eloquently summarizes: “Any exploration of the history of the myth of innocence almost invariably reveals that it finally transforms itself into its opposite.” The myth that the U.S. is the innocent nation gained special power during the cold war, when the specter of communism reinforced our sense of our own rightness and special mission in the world. We thought that, since our enemy was so unmistakably satanic, we could do no evil.

The idea that America is unique in God’s eyes and called to a special global mission might be the most common thread running through all the myths Hughes writes about. Many of us hold that there are certain “self-evident” truths that the rest of the world simply needs to recognize on our terms—whether this be the “self-evident” logic of free-market capitalism (part of the “natural” order of things embodied in the myth of the U.S. as nature’s nation) or our particular understanding of democratic rule. Many of our politicians resort without a second thought to language shot through with Christian and millennial references, regardless of their audience.

That we are supposed to grasp the positive aspect of these myths is the message of the book’s foreword, written by the eminent sociologist Robert Bellah. And because Hughes so clearly acknowledges his debt to Bellah’s work on civil religion, this foreword, intended as a framing statement for the book, merits close attention. Bellah declares that “America is the center of a new kind of empire, but it is the only empire there is. Americans are, like it or not, citizens of that empire and responsible for the whole world.” Those last five words are daunting and more than a little grandiose. But Bellah doesn’t stop there:

We are, more than ever, a city on a hill. The eyes of all people are truly on us. But do we bring light or darkness, a blessing or a curse to the rest of the world?

Chosen it seems we are: if not by God, then by geopolitics. But the historical example of that original chosen people should warn us against turning our chosenness into triumphalism. Chosenness today is our burden, and we must think long and hard about how to bear it.

Some readers will find in Bellah's words the tonic of progressive thinking—indeed, Bellah has understood himself as a progressive thinker since the publication of his seminal essay on civil religion in *Daedalus* magazine almost 40 years ago. Though he states clearly that our international adventuring has not been innocent and that our triumphalism must stop, his words carry echoes of longing for what already seems like a distant “American Century.” And talk of carrying our “burden” and of our particular chosenness sounds more like Rudyard Kipling than Martin Luther King.

Hughes's important book is full of unfinished business. The amply described historical consequences of our myths don't fortify the affirmative message Hughes wants to share. More critically, it is difficult to see how we can consider constructive the myth of America as the chosen people while scapegoating the myth of the innocent nation as the root of all evil. Hughes's distinction between the two is not convincing. Our vision of American virtue and innocence has all too often been tied to the view of ourselves as the providential tools of God's will in the world. And no matter how we try to dress our doctrine of America as chosen in the confessional clothing of humility, the raw narcissism at the center of this idea is hard to conceal. I hope that Hughes will write a sequel, this time comparing empires of other times and cultures with our own—and exploring how they coped once they realized that they didn't stand at the center of God's universe.