

American Religion and European Anti-Americanism

Thomas Albert Howard

The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 roiled transatlantic relations, offering a jarring impetus for intellectuals and policy makers to consider afresh various social and cultural differences between Western Europe and the United States, many of which had been wholly or partly obscured during the Cold War and its immediate aftermath. “The war in Iraq has made the Atlantic seem wider,” the German journalist Peter Schneider noted in a 2004 *New York Times* op-ed, “but in reality it has had the effect of a magnifying glass, bringing older and more fundamental differences between Europe and the United States into focus.” Topping Schneider’s list was what we might call the religion factor. The United States is a deeply religious nation, he noted, “while in Europe the process of secularization continues unabated.”¹

Other European intellectuals have expressed similar, if less dispassionate, sentiments, agitated in the extreme that the moral pitch of President Bush’s foreign policy—underwritten by a cabal of “neoconservative” intellectuals and “evangelical” electoral shock troops—constituted no episodic phenomenon, but expressed something entrenched, and irredeemable, in American history and culture. In part, this worry gave rise to a spectacularly staged series of essays in Europe’s newspapers of record on May 31, 2003, spearheaded by Jürgen Habermas with the late Jacques Derrida riding shotgun. In the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Habermas and Derrida called for a “core Europe”—principally France, Italy, Germany, and the Benelux countries—to serve as a “locomotive” of European integration “to counterbalance the hegemonic unilateralism of the United States.” Besides offering policy suggestions, their essay engaged in transatlantic cultural analysis, touching upon religious differences: “In European societies,

¹ Peter Schneider, “Across a Great Divide,” *The New York Times* (12 March 2004).

Thomas Albert Howard is Associate Professor of History and Director of the Jerusalem and Athens Forum at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts. He is the author, most recently, of *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University* (2006). He is currently working on a project entitled “American Religion in the European Mind.”

secularization is relatively developed.... [This] has had desirable consequences for our political culture. For us, a president who opens his daily business with public prayer... is hard to imagine.”²

The Italian philosopher and member of the European Parliament, Gianni Vattimo, lent a supporting voice in Italy’s *La Stampa*. Claiming knowledge of “something felt in the consciousness of all Europeans,” he made clear that “our spirit differs from the currently prevailing spirit in American society,” opining further that “our hope is that this difference will become the inspiring principle for a political system able to bestow on Europe the dignity and significance it deserves in world politics.” When detailing the differences, religion, once again, came to the fore:

We [Europeans] are certainly familiar with the religious roots of North American society.... But—[the] religiosity that characterizes the American spirit has ended up manifesting itself as what we fear it really is: the notion that ‘God is with us,’ and the proof of it is in our economic and military superiority.³

For sociologists preoccupied with the so-called “secularization thesis,” the transatlantic religious divide has emerged as a truism in recent scholarship. While once sociologists held that modernity led inexorably to secularization in society, most now concede that this is not necessarily the case: the United States is at once a thoroughly modernized nation, indeed the paradigmatic example of modernity in many respects, and simultaneously awash in a sea of faith, especially when compared to most Western European societies.

However, for scholars interested in the genealogy of European anti-Americanism, religion has received scant attention, despite being frequently invoked, almost offhandedly, as a leading dividing factor and source of misunderstanding between Europeans and Americans. Behind these invocatory references lies the assumption that disparaging assessments of religiosity in the United States—not unlike those of Habermas, Derrida, and Vattimo—emanate from a secular historical consciousness, inclined leftward politically, passing skeptical judgment on overly credulous “Yankees” slow to accept that enlightenment and the disenchantment of the world stand or fall together.

In this essay, besides making the general point that religious differences need to be taken more seriously by students of transatlantic relations, I want to suggest that anti-American sentiments vis-à-vis religion are not simply a byproduct of Europe’s exceptional secularism and leftist political traditions. In fact, to understand the genealogy of European

² Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, “Unsere Erneuerung; Nach dem Krieg: Die Wiedergeburt Europas,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (31 May 2003).

³ Gianni Vattimo, “L’unione affronta i nodi decisivi del suo sviluppo,” *La Stampa* (31 May 2003).

anti-Americanism in its full historical complexity, one must actually fix one's gaze at the opposite end of the political spectrum, to misgivings about the United States emanating from voices on Europe's historical right—or, borrowing from British political parlance, what I'll call "the Tory imagination." To be sure, European anti-Americanism has a recognizable "Whiggish" aspect too, a secularist-leftist mien, but this is of more recent provenance, nourished largely by Marxist political currents in the twentieth century and the juggernaut of "critical theory" in the post-war transatlantic academy. However, if we cast our glance farther back, to the nineteenth century, it becomes apparent that most European liberals and social democrats, even those inclined to radicalism, regularly lionized the United States—praising its religious voluntarism in particular—as an

example of what European nation-states should aspire to, if only they could shake off the backlash to the French Revolution and Napoleonic upheaval inaugurated by the political Restoration of 1815, the resurgent ecclesiastical establishmentarianism of this era, and the climate of Romantic nostalgia in literature and the arts.

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But it was also during the post-1815 era of Restoration and Romanticism that lasting anti-American images and metaphors first gained wide currency in European thought;

they have since migrated to various points on the political landscape, perhaps particularly to the far left today, although repositories of an older Tory anti-Americanism have by no means been extinguished.⁴ *Les extrêmes se touchent*, as the French say, and this is perhaps especially true when considering anti-Americanism and the European political spectrum.

After the collapse of the democratic experiment in France in the early nineteenth century, the fledgling American republic was the only state of any size in the world to still practice what many considered the invalidated ideas of democracy, equality, and religious voluntarism. At this time, numerous European visitors, immigrants, and intellectuals (many who never went abroad) sought to "explain" America to an Old World audience seemingly insatiable in its curiosity to make sense of the upstart nation. "America was the China of the nineteenth century," as one scholar has put it, "described, analyzed, promoted, and attacked in virtually every nation struggling to come to terms with new social and political voices."⁵ What had been regarded as a remote backwater of colonial exploitation in the eighteenth century became for Europeans, virtually overnight, truly a *novus ordo seclorum*, a phenomenon to be examined, a moral and political experiment to be judged, a possible laboratory of the future, as Alexis de Tocqueville asserted.

⁴ C. Vann Woodward, *The Old World's New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 21–2, 28–9.

⁵ Marc Pachter and Frances Wein, eds., *Abroad in America: Visitors to the New Nation, 1776–1914* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1976) xiii.

Tocqueville's own assessment of the fate of religion in the United States is fairly nuanced, but quite positive in many respects. "Upon my arrival in the United States," run often quoted lines from his *Democracy in America*,

the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention.... In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country.⁶

When coupled with tales of persecuted religious minorities finding safe haven in America, Tocqueville's interpretation suggests a fairly sanguine view of religious conditions in the new nation.

But we should resist equating Tocqueville's views on America with that of Europe's intelligentsia *tout court*. To the conservative imagination of the nineteenth century, the American religious experiment and the political institutions enabling it represented a perilous plunge into cultural confusion and social anarchy. The French arch-conservative Joseph de Maistre might well serve as the archetype of this mindset; he saw the American and French revolutions, if not identical, as signs of profound impiety, political hubris against divinely sanctioned traditions. Austria's Count Metternich, the diplomatic architect of the post-1815 order, once opined that the American polity set "altar against altar" and represented an abiding insult to time-tested Old World institutions.⁷

The Catholic Church, a pillar of the Restoration era, viewed the American experiment through the lenses of the French Revolution and the Italian Risorgimento, both judged to loose anarchy upon the world and drown the ceremony of innocence. When Félicité de Lamennais, a Catholic champion of religious liberty, made his famous appeal to Rome in 1832, he brought to the pope's attention the example of the constitutional freedoms of the United States, suggesting that modern freedoms and true religion need not be sworn enemies. The pope, Gregory XVI, was not impressed. In *Mirari vos* (1832), the encyclical rebutting Lamennais, the pope condemned religious liberty, defining it as the error "indifferentism." From "this most foul font of indifferentism," the pope wrote, "flows that absurd and erroneous teaching, or rather that folly [*deliramentum*] that it is necessary to assure and guarantee to whomever it may be the liberty of conscience."⁸

⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: Knopf, 1945) 319.

⁷ Noted in Günter Moltmann, "Deutscher Antiamerikanismus heute und früher," *Vom Sinn der Geschichte*, ed. Otmar Franz (Stuttgart: Seewald, 1976) 92.

⁸ Quoted in John Noonan, *The Church that Can and Cannot Change* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005) 148.

The Catholic Church not only regarded the American experiment as deficient in its assertion of religious freedom. As a nation founded by Calvinist separatists and harboring numerous Protestant emigrants from Europe, the United States represented for some the land where the principles of the Reformation would be reduced to absurdity. Not surprisingly, ultramontane Catholics were keen to call attention to the proliferation of Protestant sects in the United States, depicting the new nation as a grand bedlam of religious schism and theological charlatanism. For example, the entry on America in a Catholic encyclopedia (1854) depicts the United States as a land of bizarre religious enthusiasms; the authors even list one non-existent sect alleged to require its members to pluck out their right eye in literal interpretation of the biblical passage in Matthew 5:29!⁹ In his *History of Modern Protestantism* (1858), the Catholic scholar Joseph Edmund Jörg portrayed American society as floundering in “chaos,” resulting from the “religious individualism” and “sectarian spirit” of Protestantism.¹⁰

La Civiltà Cattolica, a Jesuit publication founded in Naples in 1850, emerged as a leading organ of ultramontane opinion, often exhibiting a pointedly anti-American slant. An article from 1860, “Mormonism in its Connections with Modern Protestantism,” penned by Cardinal Archbishop Karl August von Reisach (1800–69), is an apt case in point. The success of Mormonism in the United States had long been a source of bewilderment to Europe’s traditionalist imagination. In Reisach’s interpretation, Mormonism’s rise amounted to an indictment of Protestant “religious individualism,” to which the American republic had given free reign. He traced the malady of American Protestantism back to colonial New England. Trying to govern society theocratically “in a state of total reliance on the Bible,” Puritans were ultimately unable to limit individuals from interpreting the Bible for themselves and “thus the same foundational principle of the Reformation naturally and necessarily caused the collapse of such a theocratic system and caused new sects and religious societies to emerge.”¹¹ The proliferation of sects in the nineteenth century gave rise to conditions of religious confusion, allowing Mormonism fertile ground to take root and, at least for many, to pass itself off as the one true way, a safe passage from sectarianism and individualism to a secure collective and religious certainty. But in Reisach’s view, Mormonism itself represented simply a sect writ large, a symptom of American Protestantism, not its cure, and thereby a powerful, inadvertent witness for the Catholic Church as the authentic bulwark of religious truth and social cohesion.

⁹ See the entry on “America” in volume 9 of *Kirchen-Lexikon: oder, Encyclopädie der katholischen Theologie und ihrer Hilfswissenschaften*, ed. Heinrich Joseph Wetzer and Benedikt Welte (Freiburg im Breisgau: Karl Herder, 1854).

¹⁰ J. E. Jörg, *Geschichte des Protestantismus in seiner neuesten Entwicklung*, vol. 2 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder’sche Verhandlung, 1858) 457.

¹¹ “Il Mormonismo nelle sue attinenze col moderno Protestantismo,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 6 (19 May 1860): 394. I thank Mark Noll for calling my attention to this article.

European Catholic misgivings about the American polity continued apace during the pontificates of Pius IX (r. 1846–78) and Leo XIII (r. 1878–1903), arguably reaching a high watermark in the latter’s encyclical *Testem benevolentiae* (1899), which condemned the so-called heresy of “Americanism” (to my knowledge, the only time a national identity has ever been associated with a heresy).¹² The complex background to this papal condemnation found its center of gravity in debates about American freedom and ecclesiastical order. Many European clergy, particularly those in France, worried that their counterparts in the United States had succumbed to the American environment of “indifferentism,” in that some had advocated a church remodeled along liberal democratic lines. Other clergy even equated “Americanism” with the degenerate spirit of modern times itself.¹³ In Leo XIII’s encyclical, European clergy got what they wanted, even if in a much less alarmist voice: a warning against the “Americanist” heresy. The events surrounding this controversy negatively colored Catholic attitudes toward America until a time when Catholic thinkers such as Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray—not to mention Vatican II’s epochal *Declaration on Religious Freedom* (1965)—allowed for a more positive estimation of the United States.

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The Catholic Church, of course, had no monopoly on anti-American sentiment in the nineteenth century. For anyone—Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, or Reformed—who took Europe’s state-church system to be the proper state of things, the hurly-burly pluralistic ethos of American religious life, with its revivals, camp meetings, and itinerant preachers, elicited a skeptical, condescending attitude, if not one of bemusement and ridicule.

The Anglicans Frances Trollope and Bishop Samuel Wilberforce exhibited such attitudes. After traveling throughout the United States and residing for several years in Ohio, Trollope published (in London) *The Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832). Her portrait of America as a nation of revivalist zealots and as a people lacking in social refinement became a top seller in British literary circles. One cannot remain long in the United States, she observed, “without being struck with the strange anomalies produced by its religious system.... The whole people appear to be divided into an almost endless variety of religious factions.”¹⁴

¹² See *Testem benevolentiae nostrae*, “Concerning New Opinions, Virtue, Nature and Grace, with Regard to Americanism,” encyclical of Pope Leo XIII (12 January 1899).

¹³ Abbé Henry Delassus, *L’Américanisme et la conjuration antichrétienne* (Paris: Société de Saint-Augustin, Desclée De Brouwer et Cie, 1899).

¹⁴ Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: Penguin, 1997) 84.

Bishop Wilberforce of Oxford reached a comparable conclusion in his history of the Episcopal Church in the United States. “Every fantastic opinion that has disturbed the peace of Christendom,” he wrote, “has been reproduced in stranger growth on the other side of the Atlantic. Division has grown up in all its rankness, and seeded on every side a new crop of errors.”¹⁵ This reality, he feared, threatened to produce a generation of theologically illiterate and schismatic individuals who in turn would “obliterate civilization.”¹⁶ He found a modicum of comfort in that this uncivilized anarchy existed at a safe distance from the gothic tranquility of Oxford, in the far reaches of the American frontier.

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Concerns about religious anarchy easily passed over into broadsides against American culture and society generally. In his *American Notes* (1842), based on extensive travels in the United States, Charles Dickens wondered how the lack of an established church might have contributed deleteriously to American society, which he viewed as a cauldron of mob passions in politics, libel in the press, and swindling in business. The American Revolution had produced “a degenerate child,” he concluded, driving the point home in *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843), a 700-page novel-cum-anti-American polemic.¹⁷ Dickens’ disparaging musings on America, far from standing alone, fit a larger pattern of derisory commentary

on the United States by eminent visitors from Victorian Britain. Another revealing example is Matthew Arnold’s *Civilization in the United States* (1888), in which the apostle of high learning portrayed the United States as a country of Philistines given to ignoble pursuits, in possession of “a defective type of religion.”¹⁸

In Continental Europe, leaders of Lutheran and Reformed communities regularly expressed puzzlement at the religious free-for-all of the upstart nation. While the economic and political opportunities in America were rarely gainsaid, Continental religious leaders were less sanguine about the effects of American society on Old World religion and culture, being transplanted across the Atlantic by waves of German immigrants during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Philip Schaff, a Swiss-German Reformed émigré theologian, worried, for example, that the church in America (his

¹⁵ Samuel Wilberforce, *A History of the Protestant Episcopal Church in America* (New York: Standford and Swords, 1849) 290–1.

¹⁶ Wilberforce 291.

¹⁷ Charles Dickens, *American Notes* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1842) 141.

¹⁸ Matthew Arnold, *Civilization in the United States*, 6th ed. (Boston: DeWolfe, Friske, 1900), 140. For additional Victorian-era criticisms of America, see Benjamin Evans Lippincott, *Victorian Critics of Democracy* (New York: Octagon, 1974).

adopted home) lacked a principle of authority and mechanism toward unity and thus appeared destined for a career of fissiparous, obscurantist ignominy:

Tendencies, which had found no political room to unfold themselves in other lands, wrought here without restraint.... Every theological vagabond and peddler may drive here his bungling trade, without passport or license, and sell his false ware at pleasure. What is to come of such confusion is not now to be seen.¹⁹

Less devout German-speaking intellectuals also expressed their misgivings about the United States. Among them, arguably none was more influential than G. W. F. Hegel. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, America occupies a marginal position. Hegel's famous division of the world into "three distinct world-outlooks"—Oriental, Greco-Roman, and the Germanic—made no place for the indigenous peoples of the New World, and he dismissed the culture of the U.S. as derivative from Europe and ultimately of negligible importance. "America," he wrote, "has severed itself from the ground that world's history has taken place until now. What has taken place in America so far is a mere echo of the Old World, and the expression of an alien vitality."²⁰

To be sure, Hegel admitted that America might represent "the land of the future," "the land of longing for all those who are weary of the historic arsenal that is old Europe."²¹ Even so, this land of longing presented for him a problem, particularly in the religious sphere. While dismissive of traditional, creedal Christianity, Hegel was supportive of the Prussian state church and the Ministry of Culture, which had secured for him his influential post at the University of Berlin. To his mind, America constituted a deficiency insofar as it lacked a strong state and a European-style ministry of culture, which, among other things, served to check popular religious enthusiasm. From the august Prussian capital, society across the Atlantic appeared to him a hatchery of religious misfits, isolated from the truly important currents of world history. The United States is the land of "every sort of capriciousness," he wrote,

This explains the proliferation of sects to the point of sheer madness.... This total arbitrariness is such that the various communities hire and fire ministers as they please: the church is not something that [has]...an external establishment; instead, religious matters are handled according to the particular views of the congregation. In North America, the wildest freedom of imagination prevails.²²

¹⁹ Philip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, trans. John Nevin (Chambersburg: Publication of the German Reformed Church, 1845) 149–50.

²⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970) 114.

²¹ Hegel 114.

²² Hegel 112–3.

Such derisory preoccupation with religion and culture in the United States enjoyed a long life in modern Continental thought—a minor, if not a major, note in the thought of numerous intellectuals influenced by Hegel. Yet it was arguably in Hegel’s own stomping grounds, the “mandarin” guilds of the German university system in the late nineteenth century, that anti-American sentiment in general and contempt of American religious life in particular, attained a stage of true virtuosity. Although no haven of religious orthodoxy, *fin de siècle* German academic culture, as Fritz Ringer has persuasively argued, constituted a spiritual aristocracy of sorts, empowered by ideals of cultural organicism, criticism of democracy, and an ethos of daunting academic accomplishment. Scholars felt their collective worldview best preserved the genuine spiritual values necessary for a deep and rich culture (*Kultur*), one capable of producing a Goethe, Schiller, or Kant. By contrast, “Western” countries, and America foremost, represented a utilitarian, shallow, mass civilization (*Zivilization*) that threatened to place all “spiritual” (*geistige*) motivations and actions into the maw of purely individualistic, commercial interests. “The [Anglo-American] trader,” wrote Werner Sombart after the outbreak of World War I, “regards the whole existence of man on earth as a sum of commercial transactions which everyone makes as favorably as possible for himself, whether with fate or God,” adding that “the trader’s spirit molds religions in its own image too.”²³ One finds similar sentiments in the writings of a wide spectrum of thinkers, such as Oswald Spengler, Adolf von Harnack, Emil Dubois Reymond, and Eduard Spranger. The “breathless haste” of the American, Friedrich Nietzsche had written, precociously capturing a widespread fear, “is already beginning to infect old Europe with its ferocity and is spreading a lack of spirituality [*Geistiglosigkeit*] like a blanket.”²⁴

Max Weber’s well-known writings on American religious life reflect his milieu. While he was less politically illiberal and anti-American than many of his peers, his writings on the “sect spirit” in American society bear witness to a distinctly pre-democratic, European disquiet toward the United States. In the famous final passages of his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the only nation Weber mentions by name is the United States, the site of capitalism’s “highest development,” before wondering who will live in this “iron cage” of the future, this site of “mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive sense of self-importance.”²⁵ In a shorter essay, “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism,” written after visiting the United States in 1904, Weber expressed amazement at the high levels of church affiliation in the United States despite the severance of church-state ties. The transference of religion from the public to the private sphere helped account for the voluntary and “ascetic” character of

²³ Quoted in Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890–1933* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969) 183.

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974) 258–9.

²⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner’s, 1958) 181 and following.

American churches. But, in his interpretation, this asceticism only helped “put a halo around the economic ‘individualist’ impulses of the modern capitalist ethos.”²⁶

The German mandarin depiction of America as a religiously deformed, economically utilitarian, and culturally shallow civilization arguably reached its apogee in the writings of Martin Heidegger and in his highly symbolic conception of America—or Americanism—as a site of cultural catastrophe. In many respects, Heidegger is a pivotal and revealing figure in the story of European anti-Americanism. Growing up in provincial Baden in southwestern Germany and once a devoted student of Catholic theology (he sought to become a Jesuit as a young man), Heidegger had deep roots in a rural, pre-democratic conservative religious milieu. The ponderous anti-modern, anti-technological outlook that he developed—in, for instance, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*—has exerted an estimable influence on the European left: on the existentialist Marxism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and their successors; on the 1960s counterculture generally; and, not least, on leaders within Germany’s Green Party, the gold standard of contemporary leftist anti-Americanism. One also thinks of subsequent *au courant* thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse (*One-Dimensional Man*) and Jean Baudrillard (*America*), whose influence in the modern academy, on both sides of the Atlantic, has been considerable and in whose writings the Heideggerian image of “the American” as a history-less “mass man” or “collective man,” holding desperately to a simple and irrational faith, emerges as an article of certainty.²⁷

But we should not forget Heidegger himself in considering his influence. Germany, he wrote in 1935, two years after the Nazis had seized power, “lies today in a great pincer, squeezed by Russia on one side and America on the other. From a metaphysical point of view, Russia and America are the same, with the same dreary technological frenzy and the same unrestricted organization of the average mind.”²⁸ But in 1942, as the Holocaust was underway, he would write that Americanism is the purest and most problematic form of modernity. “Bolshevism is only a variant of Americanism...” he wrote, “the most dangerous shape of boundlessness, because it appears in the form of a democratic middle-class way of life mixed with Christianity, and all this in an atmosphere devoid of any sense of history.”²⁹ “Americanism,” as he put it in yet another formulation, “is the still unfolding and not yet full or completed metaphysical essence of the emerging monstrousness of modern times.”³⁰

²⁶ H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) 322.

²⁷ See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1991) and Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1988). Compare with James W. Ceasar, *Reconstructing America: The Symbol of America in Modern Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 190.

²⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 40 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1975) 40–1.

²⁹ Heidegger, “Hölderlins Hymne,” in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 53 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1975) 86.

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1957) 103; quoted in Ceasar 9.

To be sure, “anti-Americanism” is a diffuse and complicated phenomenon, polygenetic in its origins, protean in its manifestations, and diverse in possible interpretations. But, at a minimum, it is inaccurate and simplistic to regard it as a product of “the European left,” a secularist, progressive mindset passing judgment on a more religious, conservative one. The deepest historical currents of anti-American sentiment vis-à-vis religion derive from the traditionalist, political right, from “the throne and altar” milieu of reactionary, post-1815 Europe. This particular form of anti-modern conservatism—one of established churches, social hierarchy, and cultural organicism, often expressed by aggrieved aristocrats, bishops, clergy, and professors—is quite foreign to American political thought, with the partial exception of Southern Agrarianism. And in Europe today this tradition is vestigial at best (and should not be confused with more recent nationalist and anti-immigrant right-wing voices). Even so, passionate moods of being and thought perish reluctantly in history, especially when the truth of religion and the social order is at stake; more often they live on in transmuted, residual, and unexpected ways. A longer treatment would be necessary to establish this point definitively, but one can reasonably conjecture that a rather venerable Tory condescension and contempt of New World religiosity prowls about today ghost-like in the general (secular) European body politic and historical consciousness, an embedded element of cultural memory.

In the final analysis, European anti-Americanism includes a significant, if often obscured, religious dimension. One cannot properly understand its deep-seated hold on the imagination if the scope of inquiry is limited to recent history and the domains of politics, economics, and diplomacy. And it certainly transcends much-discussed single issues, such as transatlantic differences of opinion over the death penalty, the penal system, the welfare state, or the war on terror. Indeed, much deeper cultural and religious forces come into play, and this requires more penetrating historical analysis, which in turn might take one to some rather unlikely places and periods. To be sure, intellectuals such as Habermas, Derrida, and Vattimo might have important and valid grievances with the directions of the current administration; and these deserve open and fair discussion in the media and political arena. But their efforts—and those of many others—to insinuate a link between contemporary policy and America’s general religious identity might, finally, tell us as much about European attitudes toward America as about America itself. These attitudes and the long history of concerns, perceptions, and anxieties informing them deserve more attention from students of transatlantic relations.