



# American Exceptionalism

The United States is **far more religious** than other Western democracies. Scholars call this "American exceptionalism." Below, we explore some key reasons for this religiosity and how it connects to politics. We hope you find this insightful in better understanding the world's most powerful country.

## 1. Income Inequality



- Per last week's discussion, high U.S. **income inequality contributes to Existential Insecurity**. That in turn, is a key reason Americans are far more religious than people in other Western democracies.



## 2. Evangelical Exceptionalism



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- Religion faces new challenges with the dawn of the **Age of Reason**. However, movements always cause counter-responses and **Rationalism** stoked two main responses:

- **Romanticism**: argues that reasoning is arid and dry. That **what makes us humans are our emotions**, our passions, our feelings.
- **Experience**: John Locke says we are not **born** with innate ideas, but rather **as a Blank Slate**. Our ideas are born of experience which depends in turn on our sense organs. This puts experience as prior to reasoning and makes reasoning dependent on what we encounter.



*John Locke suggested people were Blank Slates at birth. Experience shaped us, including how we reason.*

- Evangelicalism, which emerges at this time, draws on both of these cultural responses:
  - John Wesley and others help launch the **Great Awakening**. This religious revival emphasizes personal, emotional experience (being '**born again**') as proof of religious power/authenticity. New forms of religiosity emphasize passionate emotions. Religious truth (are you saved?) hinges less on sacraments or even on doctrinal accuracy than on having had an inner experience – **religious truth is thus relocated to the individual**.



*John Wesley: one of the most influential figures of the Great Awakening.*

*During the Great Awakening, the experience of intense emotions was seen as proof of religious truth & power.*



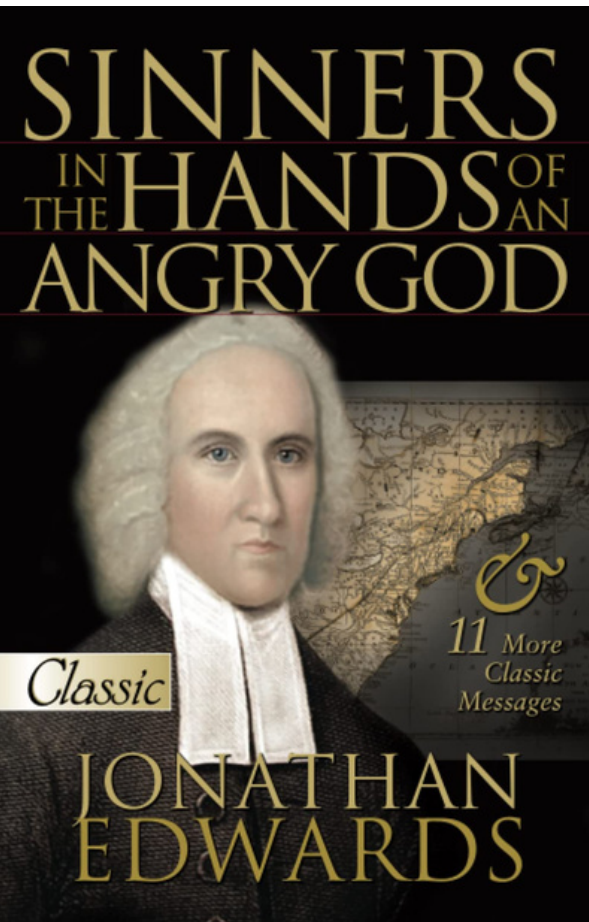
- Many scholars believe **pluralism can weaken religions** by making them seem less obviously true, less taken-for-granted. However, some counter that maybe this applies to some religions more than others:
  - They suggest that, in an era that values individualism & choice, **voluntaristic religions** (which emphasize choosing the tradition) **do better**. By embracing agency, devotees may be all the **more committed** for feeling that they chose it. It can integrate with personal identity and self-making.

Evangelicalism brings an enormous populist spirit to American religion. The new country valued the individual and the commoner. Versus older, established churches, **evangelicalism was adapted to the new American ethos**. As the chart below shows, evangelicalism is constantly: more **populist**; more **valuing of the individual**; more **oriented towards choice**; and sees emotional, **personal experiences as the marker of truth**.



Joel Osteen  
*Untrained populist; storyteller*

|                          | Established Churches       | Evangelicalism                                              |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Religious Leaders</b> | Educated Ministers         | Commoners (no theological education)                        |
| <b>Sermons</b>           | Sophisticated Theology     | Storytelling (tugs at emotions)                             |
| <b>Salvation</b>         | Calvinism (predestination) | Arminianism (free will)                                     |
| <b>Theological focus</b> | God (Father, judge)        | Jesus (friend who loves you)                                |
| <b>Congregants</b>       | Sit and listen             | Emotional responses valued!                                 |
| <b>Music</b>             | Classical Hymns            | Gospel Music (populist)                                     |
| <b>Ecclesiology</b>      | Elite hierarchies          | Democratic (local control)<br>- Innovative, entrepreneurial |



*Jonathan Edwards sophisticated and grim theology was, over time, replaced by the storytelling and more optimistic message of Billy Graham.*



*Modern evangelicalism locates religious truth in the individual's inner feelings of being saved by Christ.*

## Evangelicalism Strengthened by Anti-State Populism

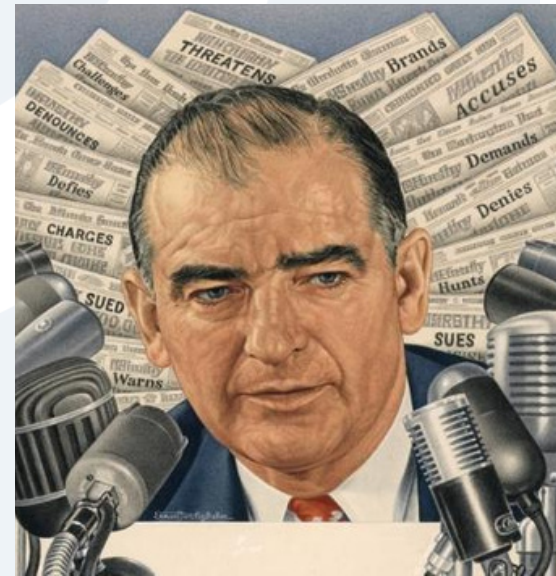
- **Secularizing forces** seem to especially **weaken religions that have an alliance between altar & throne**:
  - Thus Scandinavia, Germany, Quebec all had tight links between church and state and all became very secular. In the USA, church and state are legally separate but elite Mainline Protestantism had many informal connections and it too has weakened.

- Evangelicalism today has **enormous connections to power** and elite circles in the USA but, critically, has positioned itself as **populist and anti-state**. Its followers see the faith as for the people and against government.
- Where other churches in the USA have waned, **anti-elite populism has kept evangelicalism strong**.

- There is evidence evangelicalism has been much better at **withstanding secularization in Canada and Great Britain** as well.
  - Differences in religiosity between these three Anglo countries comes down mostly to the proportion of evangelicals in each country. Arguably **much of American exceptionalism is actually evangelical exceptionalism**.

### 3. Paranoid Style and Evangelicalism are Mutually Reinforcing

- David Martin argues that **religiosity resists secularization** more **when it is linked to a threatened national identity** (e.g. Catholic Poland under communism or Catholic Ireland under British dominance).
- The USA has not suffered foreign domination - but the country seems to have a heightened sense of threat captured in a 1964 article "The **Paranoid Style** in American politics."
- Undoubtedly, this tendency was supercharged by **the Cold War** as the USSR was a 'perfect' enemy. Soviet Russia was an opponent politically, economically and religiously which really **helped fuse nationalism, capitalism and Christianity**.
  - After WWII, **businessmen** fearing FDR's supposed socialism **funded Spiritual Mobilization**, aligning **ministers with capitalism, Christianity with free market**, and tying **government policies with atheistic communism**.



*Senator Joseph McCarthy personifies America's "paranoid" tendencies, launchings witch hunts to purge the communists supposedly taking over America's government, military, media, and Hollywood.*



- **Government assistance programs** become labeled socialism (or even communism) and thus **anti-God**.
- America's largest corporations took out ads and public relations campaigns **promoting the fusion of religion, capitalism and America's fate**.



- **Apocalyptic fear that socialism will destroy America** has been central to American discourse from the 1940s to today. It goes beyond explicitly religious voices (e.g. Rush Limbaugh, Fox News, Trump) but **American evangelical voices have been central voices in promoting this** (e.g. Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell Sr and Jr, James Dobson, Ralph Reed, Pat Robertson and Franklin Graham and untold other congregational pastors.)



*That a health care bill would introduce "death panels" exemplifies the paranoid style.*



*The fusion of religion, nationalism, and fear.*



- Martin suggested threats strengthen religions with nationalist ties. American evangelicalism offers a novel twist – **the religion mingles with this apocalyptic fear** to actually heighten the sense of threat with constant apocalyptic language. If Martin is right, the **fear generated, partly by the religion, in turn helps strengthen the religion through fusing it with national survival.**



*Paranoia and distrust of institutions in America is immensely high, facilitating events like January 6.*

In sum, America's **high income inequality**, the **individualism and anti-elite populism of evangelicalism**, and a **paranoid style** that **fuses national identity with religion**, all work to make the USA far more religious than any other Western democracy.

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