

On Deciphering Ameriglish as a Cultural Tool (Part Seven)

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This article, the seventh in a series about how contemporary Ameriglish provides insights into mainstream America,¹ treats selected items of vocabulary having to do with “religion.”

The most repeated oath of loyalty to the United States of America is the “Pledge of Allegiance,” cited here for reference: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” While looking upward at an American flag with right hand over heart or in some other form of approved salute, most children in the United States recite this at the beginning of each school day from grade one onwards, and adults do the same thing as a ritual to begin a variety of public meetings or events. As with the “Lord’s Prayer” and the “Nicene Creed” in Christianity, it is not a trivial statement to show off one’s memory, but a powerful one which is recited to demonstrate a sense of belonging and togetherness. Rephrased, this is what is being said: “I owe my loyalty to the republic that is the United States of America and which comprises one country (or one people) under God, cannot be broken up, and provides liberty and justice for everybody under its jurisdiction.” The pledge was originally composed in 1892 – twenty seven years after the republic had been reunited at the end of the Civil War (1861-65) – and did not contain the words “under God” until its fourth revision in 1954; these two words were added by an act of Congress as the Cold War got into full swing and influential Americans wanted to make an ideological statement by anchoring the American republic in religion and opposing the state-sponsored atheism, or “Godlessness,” of the Soviet Union. As the Cold War wound down and the Soviet Union vanished as a political entity, the “Pledge” has remained unchanged and children continue to learn to say that their republic represents a country or a people “under God”; intriguing, perhaps, is that although America’s recent enemy has been a religious movement (radical Islam, especially through the organization Al Qaida), the United States has not taken an

antithetical position by using atheism to combat it, but has resorted to “God Bless America” as the most used patriotic song, especially during the naughts when the “War on Terror” gripped the nation and the president at the time could be said to wear religion on his sleeve.

“God” is therefore an important concept in American society, and always has been since its political origins in British settlement along the Atlantic coast of North America, while the same can be said about other European colonies or territories – especially Spanish – which were eventually absorbed into the United States. In that context, “God” was introduced to the territory of what is now the United States – as well as to the rest of the Americas – by European Christians, some of whom were fanatics who did not shy from violence when spreading or enforcing their religion, and the general Christian interpretation is that “God” is supernatural (i.e. outside of or beyond nature) and all-powerful, created the world, and observes everything that people do with a judgmental eye for dispensing justice in the future. Instilling the fear of God has become a very useful device for organizing and controlling people in Europe and the Americas – as has spreading the “word of God” been an excuse for adventurers in pursuit of extending national influence and entrepreneurial possibilities – and although God seems to be playing less of a role in reining in antisocial or questionable behavior in American society than in the past, It (often “He”) is far from a spent device. “God” is, for better or worse, a flourishing creature in the American psyche – quite often discussed or debated, referred to in ceremonies and appealed to in various shades of solemnity, and even officially acknowledged on instruments of the national currency as the source of confidence – and a topic which cannot be avoided by anybody who seeks a relatively deep, critical understanding of mainstream American culture and/or wants to live in the United States as a reasonably knowledgeable or socially aware person. This “God” which Americans take a great interest in is at the core of what they and other people in the United States tend to call “religion,” the topic of this essay which endeavors to show how important it is for tapping into the American mindset.

To begin, the word “religion” has become difficult to define for serious scholars in the English-speaking world, mainly because the vast knowledge now available about organized faiths and/or belief systems of varying population sizes and influence makes it nearly impossible to come up with a laser-like, precise, yet all-inclusive definition. Here are three attempts to define or explain “religion,” taken from books written by Americans which the author of this essay has used in college or university

courses in the United States and/or Japan:²

If we cannot define religion precisely, we can at least observe some of its overt characteristics. There are, of course, sets of traditions and beliefs relating to a god or gods. There are also a number of rituals for expressing these beliefs. Such rituals may mark important events in people's lives: birth and death, attainment of adulthood, marriage. They are also expressed at regular intervals in a routine manner A common ritual is prayer Moreover, ritual is likely to involve the religion's literature, if such a literature exists. Most religions are characterized by complex organizational structures. (> de Blij and Murphy, in an introductory textbook for human geography)

As human beings, we define most objects, events, and experiences as profane ..., that which people define as an ordinary element of everyday life. But we also consider some things sacred, that which people set apart as extraordinary, inspiring awe and reverence. Distinguishing the sacred from the profane is the essence of all religious belief. Religion, then, is a social institution involving beliefs and practices based on a conception of the sacred. (> Macionis, in an introductory textbook for sociology)

[I]n its widest sense, [religion is] a way of life woven around a people's ultimate concerns ... [and] in a narrower sense, [religion is] a concern to align humanity with the transcendental ground of its existence Each of these six things – authority, ritual, speculation, tradition, grace, and mystery – contributes importantly to religion. (> Smith, in a reader which introduces major religions in the world)

These definitions or explanations need not be parsed or criticized for what they do not include or allude to, but rather they might be appreciated for giving insights into how well-educated Americans have tried to tackle this lexicographical problem.

When compiling information for the “Ameriglish” dictionaries³ which provide the data for the articles in this series (referenced in note 1), the main idea was to present definitions and/or explanations of items of vocabulary from the perspective of common, not necessarily “well-educated” or “specialist” usage, and the following entry from the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* (see note 3) contains four uses of the word “religion” in non-specialist discourse:

[1] any form of Christianity, (occasionally) all of Christianity; (sometimes) any other religion; (once in a while) religion.

Added to these, and separated here from item [1] because its spirit is different, is this:

[2] (for some) the opposite of science or an impediment to science.

Item [2] will be referred to later, when drawing attention to one of the ideological standoffs in the American “culture wars,” so some comments are made here to explain item [1] and to justify the order of listing, starting with the last.

That the word “religion” is defined by the same word – and the same word which is not even explained – might seem odd, but one of the objectives of the dictionaries

was to use humor and cynicism to prompt thinking on the part of the reader. In this case, what is being conveyed is that Americans occasionally do use the word “religion” to denote religion as a whole, but that nobody really knows exactly what “religion” – when all permutations of practices, beliefs, and whatever else are taken into account – is, as suggested by the citations for note 2 above as well as by these definitions from general dictionaries of American English:⁴

a system of beliefs in a god or philosophy of life[;] any system that [someone] believes in strongly. (> Newbury House)

a belief in a divine or superhuman power or powers to be obeyed and worshiped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe[;] expression of such a belief in conduct and ritual[;] any specific system of belief and worship, often involving a code of ethics and a philosophy[;] any system of beliefs, practices, ethical values, etc. resembling, suggestive of, or likened to such a system. (> Collins)

a set of beliefs concerning the nature and purpose of the universe, esp[ecially] when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency[;] an institutionalized system of religious beliefs and worship[;] something a person believes in devoutly. (> Random House)

Hence, “religion” can be whatever a speaker or writer wishes it to be, although generally implied is the fact that at least some thing is special enough to be treated as sacred or holy and to be revered or worshiped. The second and third definitions in item [1] refer to religions that have a name or could be named, and well known examples falling under the third would be Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, while a host of others from all over the world could be added. “All of Christianity,” the second definition, is included because – like Islam, for example – it does get recognized as a named religion, but it is listed second in item [1] on the grounds that rather than “Christianity,” Americans have typically expected a question such as “what is your religion?” to be answered with the name of a branch, denomination, or offshoot of Christianity, as if the likes of the Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, and Jehovah’s Witnesses subgroups form religions in and of themselves. Such replies, of course, can be accredited to the fact that within a population that mainly has belonged to or has had strong cultural links to Christianity, an answer which signifies a type of Christianity is more meaningful than a simple “Christianity,” hence no more need be said about this. Still, Christianity has historically been the most important conventional religion in the United States and, despite the diversification of the immigrant population in the last twenty-plus years, it remains so today. The *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*, therefore, contains a substantial number of entries about Christianity, and the following discussion built around items [3] to [31], all

from that publication, draws attention to terminology related to Christianity which has an impact on general life in America.

First, here is how that dictionary explains “Christianity”:

[3] a monotheistic religion which is based on the teachings of the Christ Jesus and some of his earlier followers as well as on the mythology and some of the rules and the history of the Jewish people before the life of Jesus.

It also notes that Christianity “is the de facto but not official national religion of the United States,” which acknowledges its popularity and ubiquitous symbolism despite the lack of formal governmental sanction because of a constitutional prohibition. For Christianity to exist, there need to be people who have or claim to have an attachment to the religion, and such a person is called a “Christian,” which in American discourse can be used for any of the following:

[4] somebody who goes to church; a follower of those who talk about Jesus; a follower of the teachings of the Christ Jesus.

That a person could be all three at the same time is not the issue here, but it is important to note that there is social legitimacy to the ordering. Since “Christian” can often be associated with “a good person” or somebody making an effort to be one, there are many people in America who try to cultivate such an image by making, of varying frequencies and in varying shades of seriousness, public appearances at a “church,” a “house of God” or sacred structure which is

[5] a place where Christians go to meet other Christians and to engage in various practices which are associated with at least one form of Christianity.

Going to a church does not on its own demonstrate an inner or deep commitment to Christianity, but it is at least a good social ploy which can be useful not only for image-making but also for making friends, cultivating professional and business contacts, participating in club-like activities, and even scouting for dating or marital partners. Socialization with Christians can of course intensify personal bonds and lead to deepening ideological commitment, hence the second entry in item [4] – a follower of those who talk about Jesus – which probably describes a good majority of Christians in the United States. Those “who talk about Jesus” might include people with no specialized training, yet come across as reasonably knowledgeable or dedicated peers or (more so than younger people) elders, but the more influential group comprises people who have trained for a priesthood or have received special training – notably at a seminary – to run a church and to provide for the spiritual needs of a certain set of Christians. The third entry in item [4] above, though, refers to somebody who goes straight to the source which separates Christianity from its

cognate religions of Judaism and Islam, and who might attend a church with intense seriousness of purpose, yet – given the ready availability of written scripture – might very well not see the need to.

Both “Christian” and “Christianity” are derived from the word “Christ,” which the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* notes is “the posthumous title given to Jesus of Nazareth to convey the idea that his followers considered him to have been the Messiah of ancient Jewish prophecy” and often comes across as “the surname of Jesus Christ.” Item [4] has what is technically the correct order – the Christ Jesus – but this is not commonly used, preference being given to the inverted order of “Jesus Christ,” who in popular discourse tends to simply be called “Jesus,” properly explained as

[6] Jesus of Nazareth or a Jewish person who might have lived around two thousand years ago and been a religious teacher who wanted to change contemporary Jewish ways for the better, [and] the same person who came to be known as “the Christ” and who has since become the main hero of Christians who generally consider him to have been God in a human body and to be living in Heaven now.

The same dictionary does however note that Jesus is “an imaginary adult around age thirty with a beard and compassionate look whose picture can be seen in zillions of places all over the United States,” an allusion to the ubiquitous propaganda issued by Christians there, so much so that a reasonable observer might be tempted to wonder if Jesus has been transformed from the “king of the Jews,” as Christian literature has it, into the “king of the Americans.” As befitting a king, Jesus may be addressed in prayer as “Lord” and be spoken about as “the Lord,” which is slightly complicated by the fact that, as the same dictionary notes, “the Lord” can refer to “Jesus or God or both,” bringing attention to one of the most important words in Ameriglish, “God.” This is

[7] an abstract and often humanized character which is the only deity that Christians recognize and which can be traced to the ancient Hebrews [= Jews].

Two things from the same dictionary need to be added here to emphasize the importance of this word in American discourse: God “gets argued about in one form or another by practically everybody in the United States,” and God is “something or perhaps somebody to which or to whom virtually anything can be attributed.” Added to which, of course, is the expression “oh my God” to express surprise to some extent or other.

When Americans say that theirs is “one nation under God,” and whether they intend to or not, they are alluding to two principles from Christian ideology. One is in essence spiritual politics: by being “under God,” their nation is reigned over by

this deity, this “Almighty,” which supposedly controls the universe and thereby has even more power than the “most powerful man in the world,” the president of the United States, and all the other politicians, military personnel, and whatnot lumped together; in a sense, then, being “under God” ought to result in sublime fatalism since the “Almighty” controls everything, but Americans have generally not figured this one out yet. The second allusion in the expression “under God” is cosmological location: the American nation is physically below God because God, as noted in the entry above about God’s one-off human incarnation (item [6]), lives in “Heaven,”

[8] a pleasant place in the sky where God and Jesus and angels live and where good people or their souls go upon death as a reward for having behaved properly while alive on Earth.

The wording “God and Jesus” in item [8] ought not be thought about too much here – most Americans, anyway, do not delve deeply into Christian theology – but the point being made is that the abode of God is somewhere in the sky, a physical entity of sorts which comprises air, clouds, the sun, the moon, and stars and which is above the surface of the Earth, hence the American nation – as well as any other for that matter – is below Heaven or “under” its chief resident, God. As noted in item [8], other residents of Heaven are angels and good people or their souls, and an “angel” is

[9] an imaginary humanlike character which probably has wings and is invisible and is benevolent or good.

A special type of angel which Americans have taken an interest in in recent decades is the “guardian angel,” one which the same dictionary notes “makes sure that bad things don’t happen to a certain person or at least that things don’t get worse for that person,” and one which suggests that even God delegates authority from time to time. Still, a famous character in Christianity is “the fallen angel” which has yet to be redeemed, “the Devil” or

[10] a person-like character which is usually considered to be red and to have horns and a long tail and which is in charge of meting out punishments to the people or their souls that have been sent to Hell for having misbehaved while alive on Earth.

The abode of the Devil, known as “Hell,” is not just cosmological but also geographical:

[11] a place underground where the Devil lives and where it is very hot and where all sorts of unpleasant things are meted out to people or their souls as a punishment for having sinned and otherwise misbehaved while alive on Earth.

So far, and despite the wonderful findings of the so-called Age of Discovery and its continuation into Outer Space and the interior of the Earth, nobody has been able

to locate either Heaven or Hell, yet they are cosmological ideas which express the conflict between “good and evil” or, as the same dictionary has it, “opposing moral classifications of people and behavior and actions.” America and other places on the planet are the theater for this contrast to be played out, and the United States – being “under God” and not under the Devil – has taken on a missionary quest to rid the world of evil, be it the “Evil Empire” (the Soviet Union), the “Axis of Evil” (Iraq under Saddam Hussein, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea), or anything else that it fancies declaring evil, bad, wrong, unjust, or something similar.

While America might be on a mission to save the world, many people in the United States consider Jesus to have a more realistic agenda than their government and its allied political and economic zealots. As “the Savior,” “Jesus saves” individuals, and the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* has entries for “to save,” “to be saved,” and “saved;” but the explanation for “saved” suffices for purposes here:

[12] having gone through a process in which Jesus is brought into a person’s life to prepare the way for its soul to ascend to Heaven upon death.

There is no rule for when a person can “be saved,” but the so-called “born again” Christians form a rather self-promoting group. Whereas children and teenagers who undergo the process might not understand what the ritual of being “saved” implies from the point of view of making amends for previous “bad” behavior, those who become “born again” – mainly middle-age men, probably experiencing a mid-life crisis as the reality of their eventual death sinks in – seem to have come to an understanding that their afterlife might very well not be pleasant lest amends be made before the Devil comes to collect the soul. A person in such jeopardy is considered to be “lost,” which is to say

[13] having strayed from the teachings of Jesus or from the teachings of people who talk about or teach about Jesus and therefore being in danger of going to Hell upon death.

Getting oneself to church, learning more about Jesus and his teachings, spreading the word of “the Lord,” and becoming a properly behaved person are among the things that a “saved” person does. Although not every Christian or every Christian group in the United States goes in for this “saving” business, it is an activity which is sufficiently noticeable in the country that many people have learned that, in order to appease or politely disengage a “Jesus saves” enthusiast, an acceptable reply to the theological question “are you saved?” is “I was never lost.”

Whether into “saving” or not, the various Christian groups in the United States

do have their sacraments and expectations of the faithful. Obviously, Christians are encouraged to “go to church,” a “church” (item [5]) being a physical structure or compound where likeminded Christians meet for worship, prayer, and other activities such as Holy Communion or singing depending on the branch or denomination. Services at a church are conducted by a specialist such as a priest, pastor, or preacher who might be addressed or spoken about as “Father” or “Brother,” and the main source of information for whatever crops up at a church service is the “Bible,” which is

[14] a very thick book with a large number of pages with small letters which contains statements that apparently cover anything and everything and which is therefore a convenient reference to cite in order to justify anything said or done or to waste somebody’s time by asking that person to prove that something is not covered by at least one statement in it.

What is in this “very thick book” which very few people read through is a compendium of ancient Jewish mythology, laws, history, and wisdom – the so-called “Old Testament” which comprises about three quarters of the entire volume – and a compendium of stories about Jesus and the early Christians which eventually draws to a close with a scary “revelation” about the future. The latter compendium, known as the “New Testament” and the remaining quarter that was tacked on to and bound together with the “Old Testament” before plagiarism became an issue in Western academia, is the part which Christians study the most, although they are generally aware of selected parts of the Old Testament such as the stories of Creation, Noah and the Flood, the Tower of Babel, and Moses as well as pieces of wisdom that are found in Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. Other than the account of Creation, which is mentioned later in this essay, the part of the Old Testament which Christians in America have forced into public debate are the “Ten Commandments”:

[15] the most important guidelines which the God of the ancient Hebrews gave to the ancient Hebrews and which at least some Christians have taken an interest in.

Basically, the “Ten Commandments” is a list of demands for proper ethical conduct – originally to cultivate and preserve the unified integrity of the ancient Hebrews, who have since come to be known as the Jewish people – and they tend to enter general public discourse every so often when, as the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* notes, “somebody wants to or does display them in a public place that is supposed to be secular,” their relationship to Christianity and the five commandments which directly cite “God” being the source of friction. From the New Testament, however, comes advice spoken by Jesus which is known in mainstream American society and

does not cause controversy, mainly because it is useful and can transcend religious and secular boundaries; this is the “Golden Rule”:

[16] do unto others as you would like others to do unto you.

Never mind that, as the same dictionary emphasizes by listing the twisted one before the real one (item [16]), many people in the United States behave as if this rule is interpreted to mean “do unto others what others do or might do unto you.”

Arguments over displaying the “Ten Commandments” in public, as well as those about “under God” in the “Pledge of Allegiance,” belong in the domain of the “culture war” or the “culture wars” within the United States. Although the influx of culturally diverse immigrants since the 1990s has played a part in the cultural changes within American society, a lot of the changes can be attributed to the shifting values, more freedoms, advances in scientific knowledge, and the effects of technological development within the American citizenry per se, and those changes have been pitting Americans against Americans in recent conflicts or battles which get summed as the “culture war(s).”

[17] a rather vague set of value-based arguments which deal with an amorphous set of issues having something to do with whatever people do in the United States and which involve some people claiming to be conservative in the sense of upholding traditions and morality as it was assumed to be in the past and other people claiming to be liberal or progressive in the sense of wanting to change things for what they consider to be the better or more tolerant or more humane or something like that.

Those who would like for Christianity to play a meaningful role in general society and in political symbolism typically fall within the “conservative” side, although things are not that simple, and Christianity itself has not been faring very well in the “culture war(s).”

One example is how the two most special occasions within the Christian calendar have undergone secular corruption in the service of commercialism. “Easter” is for the serious Christian, as noted in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary*, “the culmination of the most holy week in the annual calendar because it focuses on the death of Jesus,” but it has been bastardized so that for most people in the United States, Easter is

[18] a popular celebration which involves rabbits and eggs as well as games and candies for children.

Not that there is much of a connection between the “Easter Bunny” hiding “Easter eggs” for children to find and Jesus suffering a cruel death through crucifixion, but at least some Christians do continue to remind the general public of what Easter

truly is supposed to be about. The second special occasion in the Christian calendar is, of course, “Christmas,” which for serious Christians involves a special service (mass) on the night of December 24-25, and for them and other Christians is “a religious celebration on December 25 to commemorate the birth of the Christ Jesus,” but which has been completely twisted in mainstream America as

[19] a popular commercial festival which culminates on December 25 and during which time nearly everybody pretends to like everybody else, [and] the most important time of the year for conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption.

Although the “Christmas season” may be temporally defined as lasting from the final week of November until a few days after December 25 (post-Christmas sales), sales and other events related to Christmas might start several weeks in advance of Christmas Day, even as early as August or September, making “Christmas” a rather protracted event which cannot be avoided for roughly a quarter of a year, and as much as it might be promoted as “secular,” everybody is reminded of its origins through the likes of Nativity scenes and exhibits in which the baby Jesus is central, songs commemorating the birth of Jesus, and greetings cards with Jesus-based themes. Some Christians in the United States, not at all pleased with how Christmas has been debased into a prolonged commercial event, have declared that there is a “War on Christmas,” being

[20] a cultural attack by liberals on the American tradition of celebrating the religious holiday which commemorates the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

Within the “culture war(s),” some elements within the Christian fold promote an intellectual paradigm which enters not just general social discourse but also arguments about educational curricula. This traces to one of the best known myths of Christianity, a literal interpretation of the ancient Jewish story which alleges that the world – in essence, the universe since the stars are included – not only had a beginning but also was created by their “God,” and which is known throughout the United States as (the) “Creation.” From this has come “Creationism,”

[21] a philosophy which has been very popular among some Christians and which argues that the Biblical story about God having created everything is true.

Somebody “who supports and endorses Creationism” is a “Creationist,” and Creationists have been quite persistent in rejecting what they consider to be the opposing philosophy of “Evolution,”

[22] a secular and scientific theory which argues that life on this planet has been going through all sorts of changes ... [and] which irritates followers of Creationism or Intelligent Design because it does not argue that the Biblical story about God creating everything is true.

It is not uncommon to hear a supporter of Creationism dismiss Evolution along the lines of “Evolution is a *theory* [emphasis theirs, subtle or not], but the Bible is the truth,” oblivious to the facts that the Bible is literature and that Evolution is an attempt to explain things as they really are and/or have been. The biggest Creationist objection to Evolution, though, is its argument that human beings developed into a separate species from apes (nowadays narrowed down to chimpanzees), and thus were not “created” as something distinct and special after the animals and everything else had been created; not in a position to get Evolution eradicated from state-sponsored compulsory education, which is where Creationists see Evolution doing its greatest damage by perverting young minds, they engage in quixotic lobbying to get Creationism slotted into natural-science curricula as an alternative to Evolution.⁵ At first read that might seem odd, but since at least the 1980s Creationism has shifted from a telling of the Creation myth and upholding it as the literal truth to engaging the enemy – “science” – on its own terms by accumulating data and analyzing them methodologically to demonstrate that everything which “science” deals with can be fit into the scheme of Creation and, its corollary, the roughly 6000-year existence of the world. In its confrontation with Evolution, Creationism has thus become a “science” in its own right and, along the way, has been evolving into “Intelligent Design,”

[23] a rather recent philosophy adapted from Creationism and which is popular among some Christians because it appears to be more sophisticated than Creationism ... [and] which is replacing Creationism as a tool for some Christians to argue that Evolution cannot be true.

Despite the apparent futility of Creationism and Intelligent Design to win over the souls of people in the United States who have been – in the eyes of their supporters – corrupted by Evolution, it ought to be said that the Creation myth has had a profound impact on modern science, wittingly or not: the “Big Bang” theory, accepted nowadays as conventional wisdom and taught in science courses in compulsory and higher education, is very much the same thing, a myth of creation that defies common sense (from nothing everything, or from an extremely minute particle an infinity of particles?, and whence the energy, and so suddenly?) and which seems to have taken on religious undertones within mainstream science.

While the Creationism-versus-Evolution dispute periodically flares up within the “culture war(s),” Christians have other issues to engage in. One that has been a hot item in recent years is “marriage,” which most Christians are likely to consider

[24] a formal social arrangement involving one man and one woman who make

a life together with the implicit idea that they could raise children.

Generally, society has seemingly rewritten the definition along the lines of “a social arrangement involving two people who live in the same place and can engage in sexual activities with each other” – a reflection of such things as “marriage” having become an almost trivial social relationship with the easing of divorce laws from the 1970s, and the term “monogamous” having shifted in meaning from “being married to only one person” to “having only one sexual partner during a certain period of time” – as well as hurled a great insult at Christian principles by not only approving homosexuality but also allowing practitioners to “get married.” Related to “marriage” are “family values,” another favorite topic among Christians which may be explained as

[25] an old-fashioned set of concepts which places emphasis on the moral well-being of a legally established group of people that is comprised of a father and a mother and at least one child.

This is an issue in the United States because what constitutes a “family” – “a group of people somehow related by blood or law or social agreement” in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* – need not be clear, and American family arrangements have become sufficiently complicated that references to “half” siblings, “step” children, “biological fathers,” and “single” parents have become rather commonplace. Families have traditionally been social arrangements for socially approved, or “legitimate,” human fertilization, but many people in the United States have discovered that children can be made without the bother of getting married, as well as that the physical exercise which could result in a pregnancy can be fun and/or used to demonstrate such things as fondness, personal commitment, and sexual ability. When an unwanted pregnancy occurs, however, there are some serious realities to be faced, and a popular solution over the last forty years at least has been to have an “abortion,” which has become

[26] a very important political issue which revolves around killing fetuses and which a very active minority are against and another minority argue must be allowed by law and another minority or perhaps the majority seem not to be terribly bothered about but seem to think that it’s better to allow it than not to.

Christian activists generally take a “pro-life” stand on the issue, which is to say

[27] being of the opinion that abortion should not be legal because it destroys a human being even though that human being has yet to come out of its womb.

Opponents of “pro-lifers,” Christian or otherwise, are “pro-choice,” which is to say

[28] being of the opinion that abortion should be legal and that a woman should be the ultimate decision-maker when it comes to things affecting her body and

thereby can elect or opt for destroying a human life which has started inside her. Needless to say, any which way that abortion is looked at, it is a fairly nasty issue.

Whereas the most vocal of the Christian activists in the United States tend to take a position “for life” in cases of the unborn innocent, they are often enough for terminating life through the “death penalty” in cases of heinous crimes. This serves as a premonition of the direction certain types of Christian might like to take American civilization if they had things their way, or somehow seized power; they are often lumped together under such labels as the “Religious Right,” the “Christian Right,” and “Christian Fundamentalists,” which respectively are (and the last being grammatically adapted here from the entry “Christian Fundamentalist”):

[29] Christians (typically Protestants) who would love to do with the United States what the ayatollahs and their conspirators have done with Iran since 1979 or who would at least like Christianity to play a larger and more important role in American government and culture in general;

[30] people and institutions which are usually Protestant and which adhere to certain traditions within Christianity and have a self-proclaimed conservative view on what American society ought to be; [and]

[31] people who are quite likely Protestants that take a rather rigid approach to the Bible and related teachings and who are more than likely to assert that the Bible is the absolute truth and who might very well be of the mindset that the Bible ought to be used as the guiding document for society.

Other terms which can be encountered that essentially refer to the same type of person are “conservative Christian” and – shortened from “theological conservative” and rhyming with “neocon,” a political soul mate – “theocon,” while the expression “social conservative” usually implies political values with a reasonably strong dosage of Christianity. In a benign form, such Christians with a mission might be interested in “saving” souls, but a political agenda does exist, and this is why vigilance is required in the United States when it comes to such issues as putting the likes of the “Ten Commandments” and Christmas Nativity scenes on display at what are supposed to be secular institutions, demanding that “under God” remain in the “Pledge of Allegiance,” and pushing for prayer in public schools. Absent a coup d’état or revolution which is ideologically Christian, keeping Christianity in the public conscience and making it appear normal by citing “tradition” or the cultural heritage can be a subtle way to tease the general public in the eventual direction of a theocracy, or at least a polity in which Christianity exerts more influence on legislation and its enforcement than is currently the case. A high-profile example is the periodic attempts to get a Republican president to nominate for the U.S.

Supreme Court candidates who might vote antagonistically in regard to the spirit and content of *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court decision of 1973 which allows abortions within a reasonably commonsensical framework, when cases directly or indirectly related to abortion make their way to the docket of the country's highest court of law. Overturning *Roe v. Wade* is certainly a priority within the conservative Christian agenda, and other things which they might like to see maintained or (re) introduced into mainstream life have less to do with paying homage to tradition or cultural quaintness than with familiarizing more people with Christianity, making it appear normal, and shaping minds into a Christian outlook. To do this, having children declare that the United States is "one nation under God" is useful, but more can be done in schools such as having prayers said, Creationism taught as science, and even parts of the Bible studied as literature or philosophy; in the meantime, a benign foundation would be established for an appreciation of the "Ten Commandments," which themselves set the tone for accepting many more Old-Testament commandments that regulate human behavior, and general society would then be prepared to accept the brutal punishments they demand as well as an overhaul of current liberties in regard to such things as abortion, the dysfunctional "family," a sense of equality between men and women, "abnormal" and "unnatural" sexuality, liquor and narcotic drugs, other forms of popular entertainment, the secular commercialization of Christmas and Easter, and tolerance for those beyond the cultural pale of the creed, as well as an end to natural science for having dared to delve into the secrets of God's design, perverting the minds of youth into thinking that people came from apes, and otherwise being in conflict with "the Truth."

It is doubtful that anywhere near a majority of Americans would truly want the United States to become a theocracy or at least a polity guided to a significant degree by hardcore Christianity, yet various strains of the religion are rather active in the marketplace for the hearts, minds, and souls of people throughout the land, as well as in other countries. Some churches in America are famous for such things as door-to-door missionaries, evangelical events, publicizing or advertising positions on sociopolitical issues, being involved with community events and even organizing some such as sports leagues, and running businesses of a medical nature, and individual Christians themselves – from high-profile preachers on television or with political connections to people eking out a life in "low-income" America – are quite happy to spread "the Word" or at least to broach such topics as "God," "Jesus," and "the Bible," with the most influential reaping not just satisfaction from social

influence but also – as with some “televangelists” – substantial financial reward. Opening questions can be rather innocuous – “do you believe in God?,” “do you read the Bible?,” “are you saved?,” or “do you go to church?” for example – yet there is often enough more at work than a casual interest in the soul of the person being approached, and the likes of engaged discussion, offers such as “let us pray together,” and visitations to a church can progress from casual encounters into manipulation, social expectations, and mind control in one shade or another. For some people, of course, this can turn out to be a valuable transformation – as it is in the case of getting a new set of friends, a chaotic life straightened out or cleaned up, a direction to and purpose in life, or a new personal relationship with the “Almighty” – but for others getting involved with a church can turn out to be a club-like experience which eventually becomes boring or more bother than its worth. Another factor in recruiting, of course, is statistical: numbers reflect success, influence, and power, so a new recruit represents an asset in the form not only of another person in the fold, but also of a marginal increase in financial contributions (through tithes or other donations), while whoever was involved in the recruiting can feel a bit more special.

Not that any of this need be bad – often there is a genuine personal interest at the grass-roots level – but it does require vigilance, especially whenever influential Christian individuals and organizations try to inject religious beliefs and practices into politics, secular community events, and compulsory education. Creationism, for example, might seem quaint, and transforming it or Intelligent Design into a “science” might seem quirky or eccentric, but if it were taught as a serious part of curricula in public schools, it would gain secular legitimacy and establish a foundation upon which children could be inclined to accept everything else offered by Christianity as a logical stream which winds its way through the various subjects and dictates how a person is supposed to navigate life. Rather than being a personal matter of faith, as it sometimes gets put in the United States, “religion” is more of a tool for creating mindsets, controlling individuals, organizing society, and supporting or even legitimizing the authority of its leaders, something that is certainly not beyond the scope of understanding of activists who promote a Christian agenda within the “culture war(s).” In a sense, there is a crusade-like feel to Christian activism in the United States, and especially by the Christian Fundamentalists, as their mission comes across as being one to reclaim the soul of the nation and to rescue the country from “liberals” who paved the way for America to fall into moral decadence; given that the Crusades of the European Middle Ages took place over

roughly two hundred years (or longer, depending on what counts), and the fact that the American legal systems have been rather good at defending and even expanding human rights, it looks like the present Christian Fundamentalist mission will be a long-haul one, yet one which recalls the message that opens the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes – everything is futile.

Still, the allusion to the Crusades allows for an observation of cultural Americana in the international arena, where the behavior of the United States is often conditioned by domestic circumstances and intellectual rationale that make sense to Americans, especially those who vote. Over the generations, it has been relatively easy for those who frame public debate in America to portray issues as two-sided, rather than multifaceted, and that the two sides can be simplified as right and wrong or something such like, and indeed the entire system of government and politics in the United States has long settled on bilateralism, even if there is a shiftiness to it. When it comes to international issues and events, a two-sided simplification often colors public discourse in the United States and its population in general gets dragged into supporting one side – sometimes to the chagrin of thinking Americans who are aware of how complex things can be – and the side chosen gets depicted as being in the service of a good cause, usually an abstract concept (e.g. freedom, human rights) or ideology (e.g. democracy, capitalism), which must overcome the forces of evil. During the Cold War, for instance, “Communism” represented evil in the abstract while the Soviet Union was its most consistent, terrifying manifestation in the real world, supplemented on occasion by subsidiaries which could be demonized in human form through the likes of Mao Zedong or the Viet Cong; “Communism,” furthermore, was characterized negatively as “Godless” – true to the extent that Marxism and its offshoots have generally been atheist and opposed to religion, “the opiate of the people” – but never positively in its role as liberator of oppressed peoples (e.g. the Russians, although they had been oppressed to a large extent by the Russian Orthodox Church) and countries (e.g. those of French Indochina and, under the Japanese, Korea). After the Cold War had come to an amicable conclusion, though, the United States set about fostering a new enemy – Islamic Fundamentalism – which had been in the works since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and here the parallel with the Crusades of the European Middle Ages is rather obvious, although this version is not one of liberating Jerusalem and the “Holy Land” from the Muslims, but a matter of petroleum and containing radical Islam so that a new type of caliphate does not emerge. That the recent American presence in Afghanistan

and Iraq has taken on the appearance of a “crusade” is not empty rhetoric on the part of Muslims, especially those who have been on the receiving end of American anger or empathize with them, because personnel in the American government and the American population at large have resorted to Christian symbolism as the American military went after Usama bin Laden, Al Qaida, and the Taliban – all overtly Islamic Fundamentalists – and Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq which was run by the Ba’ath Party, an organization that sought an Arab “Renaissance,” and from 1991 had the Arabic words for “God is great” inscribed on the national flag; while Muslims were shouting “God is great!” and talking about “jihad” in the naughts, Americans were patriotically singing the song “God Bless America,” the American president was often finishing speeches and such like with a plea that “God bless America” and letting people know that he was a “born-again” Christian, a prominent American evangelist declared that Islam was an “evil” religion, American Christians became upset about the proposal to build a mosque not far from the World Trade Center buildings which were obliterated on “Nine Eleven,” and the American military was “defending” the American way of life on Islamic soil. Once the Islamic menace surrenders, is defeated, or somehow drifts into oblivion, however, the United States can be counted on to discover a new “evil” which requires concentrated effort to battle, and the current leading candidate is the People’s Republic of China, but further speculation is not required here.

That America has been unpleasantly engaged with Islamic groups and countries, including to the point of outright military hostilities, since the 1979 revolution in Iran has led to an increasing awareness of this other type of “religion.” It is now possible to speak of “Islamic literacy” – “a reasonable amount of positive knowledge about what Muslims do or are supposed to do” in the *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary* – and such notable items of vocabulary as “mosque,” “jihad” (especially in its militant context), “sharia(h)” (often extended to “sharia(h) law” or “sharia(h) Islamic law”), “Ramadan,” and of course “Allah” have become reasonably familiar to people in the United States, although knowledge of Islam is generally superficial at best and “Islamophobia” is common enough for that term to have been coined. Other than Islam, Americans are also aware that there is a “religion” known as Judaism – from which both Christianity and Islam evolved as non-Jews found Hebraic monotheism to be useful – as well as a variety of others such as the Native American faiths and practices, “Eastern” belief systems that originated in India and China, and variants of New Age spiritualism or mysticism, but in the end, these are marginal to mainstream

American society and have a long way to go before they can exert a meaningful, serious influence on the popular mentality.

Even if it is in decline in terms of numbers and social influence, Christianity is still by far the number-one religion in the United States, as suggested by a survey taken in 2008, in which 76% of the American population sampled claimed to be Christian: 51%, a very slim majority of the population, fell within the broad classification of “Protestant,” while 25% were “Catholic” and constituted the largest specified group of Christians in the country. Although the figure of 76% is lower than what it was roughly fifty years ago (90% in 1963) and does not imply serious faith or commitment on the part of all who claim to be Christian, it is sufficiently high to assert that Christianity is the national religion of the United States, even if – like the (American) English language – it is “unofficial.” When it comes to other religious affiliations, the numbers revealed in the 2008 survey are trivial – “other religions” comprised 4% of the population – with Judaism being the second largest religion in the United States at 1.2% and Islam the third at 0.8%. A similar proportion of 5.2% “refused to reply” or “did not know” what their religious affiliation was, but more significant were the 15% who claimed not to be affiliated with a religion; given that the figure for people in the United States with “no religious identity” in 1963 was 2%, it appears that the drop in the percentage for Christians from 90 to 76 (14) has been offset by the rise in the percentage of people who did not claim a religious identity from 2 to 15 (13).⁶ Although it is difficult to say exactly why this correlation exists, it might very well have something to do with the advances in natural science, which bring into serious doubt such things as the existence of God and the Creation story, and – despite the lamentations of politicians and educators about Americans doing poorly at science – the influence of “science” in compulsory education. A related anecdote is therefore a fitting way to bring this essay to a thoughtful conclusion: other than the ubiquitous cross, another symbol for Christianity which has become rather popular in the United States is an outline sketch of a fish; this fish may often be seen adorning cars, and a variant which the author of this essay recalls seeing in the mid naughts had little legs added to the bottom of the body. At least concerned Christians can take some comfort in the fact that “evolution” is a very slow process.

Notes

1. The first six are in *Gengo Bunka Ronshû / Studies in Language and Culture* 31, 1 (2009): 173-191; 31, 2 (2010): 3-19; 32, 2 (2011): 33-50; 35, 1 (2013): 135-153; 35, 2 (2014): 37-54; and 36, 1 (2014): 135-155.

2. In the order of their appearance: H.J. de Blij and Alexander B. Murphy, *Human Geography: Culture, Society, and Space* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 157; John J. Macionis, *Society: The Basics* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2004), 352; Huston Smith, *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 183 and 93.

3. In the order of publication: George Jap's *Ameriglish Dictionary* (2007), *Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2008), *Second Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2008), *Third Advanced Ameriglish Dictionary* (2009), and George Jappe's *Larger Ameriglish Dictionary: A Means to Study a Dynamic Language and to Gain Insights into a Complex Culture* (2012). All five dictionaries were printed at Nagoya University, and the last one includes most of the entries in the other four, although with some changes, and has a good number of additional entries (altogether there are 2892 entries).

4. Respectively as cited: <http://nhd.heinle.com/> (Heinle's Newbury House Dictionary of American English); <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/american> (Collins American Dictionary); and Random House, *Webster's Everyday Dictionary* (New York etc.: Random House Reference, 2002), 452. The Internet sites were first accessed for this essay in early September 2013.

5. As an aside, it has often occurred to this author that a reasonable solution to this problem would be for state-sponsored compulsory education to integrate Creationism into natural-science courses in exchange for the various churches integrating, in a similar proportion and in utmost seriousness, Evolution into their teachings.

6. The statistical information in this paragraph was taken from Wikipedia's article "Religion in the United States," which was consulted in September 2013 before writing this article and again in February 2014 when reviewing the script; the statistics for 2008 specifically are from the "American Religious Identification Survey" taken that year.