Religion, the Spanish-American War, and the Idea of American Mission

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May we not feel assured that if we do our duty, the Providence which favored the undertakings of the fathers and every step of our progress since, will continue His watchful care and guidance over us, and that “the hand that led us to our present place will not relax His grip till we have reached the glorious goal He has fixed for us in achievement of His end”? —William McKinley, 18991

Throughout U.S. history, from manifest destiny through Ronald Reagan’s opposition to the Soviet Union’s “evil empire” to George W. Bush’s effort to transform Iraq into an outpost of American democracy, U.S. statesmen have often applied a moralistic understanding of American identity to their foreign policy visions. This tendency to conceive of international relations in a missionary fashion was particularly evident during the Spanish-American War of 1898, when the United States transformed itself from a continental power into a fledgling global empire. The war stemmed from several motives, only one of which was the nation’s sense of mission. Many in the United States had long had designs on Cuba, for example, and an expansionist cabal of some influence pressed for war primarily to satisfy geopolitical ambitions.2 Even so, the fact that President William McKinley and many others were

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1. “Speech at the ‘Citizen’s Banquet,’ Chicago, 19 October 1899,” microfilm, Papers of William McKinley.
consistent in offering moral arguments to justify American policy must also be factored into our understanding of this episode.

The main argument that I will defend in this essay holds that the idea of American mission figured prominently into the decision by the United States to intervene in Cuba in 1898. In this essay I stress, in particular, the religious dimension of this missionary spirit and show that the norms by which the nation’s political leaders interpreted the Spanish-Cuban crisis in 1898 reflected America’s Christian culture. The essay begins with a brief discussion of the idea of American mission before moving on to overviews of America’s religious culture in 1898 and of the origins of the Spanish-American War. The bulk of the analysis, however, is devoted to the official political debate that preceded the conflict in which President McKinley and Congress defined the terms by which the United States would fight Spain, with religious and moralistic language highlighted.

I do not argue that religion was primarily responsible for America’s decision to fight Spain in 1898. Rather, my goal in this analysis is to draw attention to the interplay between religion, morality, and policymaking during a critical juncture of America’s emergence on the world stage. Previous studies have examined the postwar agitation by religious organizations to induce expansionism to facilitate their proselytizing ambitions. The way the ideas of Josiah Strong, Albert Beveridge, and other apostles of Anglo-Saxon Christian imperialism structured the postwar debate is already familiar to students of this period. Here I detail a different line of evidence that shows how missionary rhetoric permeated the prewar debate as well. One conclusion invited by this research is that a religious sense of mission contributed to the decision by the United States to engage Spain in a war in 1898 by lending moral authority to a controversial policy. Humanitarian interventionism remains today


beyond the political grasp of most modern democracies, but Americans were unambiguous that they should undertake one on behalf of Cuba. Less clear is the extent to which the religious rhetoric that peppers these debates reflects the speakers’ true beliefs or whether their language was calculated to lend insincere moral legitimacy to baser economic, political, or other motives. While it is on some level impossible to confidently gauge any individual’s true intentions, the social and political value of religious justifications, without which there would have been no point invoking religious ideas, suggests religion’s crucial role in American national identity in 1898. The religious component of Americans’ self-perception as being the kind of nation that has a mission to rescue oppressed peoples in other lands has not been studied as thoroughly as some other motives from 1898. This article attempts to fill this gap and shed new light on how religion and morality can help to shape foreign policy.

The Idea of American Mission

The idea of American mission is the belief that the United States has a destiny to improve and enlighten the world, whether passively, by serving as a political and moral exemplar, or actively, by promoting liberal democratic values abroad. It is an attitude that captures the moral aspirations of U.S. foreign policy, and it often inspires the country to endow mundane policy objectives with more far-reaching significance. Americans are uncomfortable with pursuing policies defined according to a national interest that lacks a moral dimension, which explains in part why, for example, Germany, Japan, and now Iraq had to be converted into liberal democracies after defeat.

Liberal theorists argue that America’s efforts to spread democracy support its security interests, a claim based in Immanuel Kant’s democratic peace theory. The United States, as the world’s first liberal democracy, has historically found this logic compelling, which helps account for its opposition to contrasting models of political organization, such as monarchy, communism,

and fascism. Yet, the idea of American mission also includes an idealistic streak: Americans seek to universalize their political system (and often their mores) not simply because they believe that doing so serves their national interest, but also because they are convinced that their values and institutions are good.

The United States, as a political experiment, began with the premise that all humans deserve to be free, and Americans generally refuse to accept the legitimacy of any regime founded according to contrary principles. Believing that their state has an essentially metaphysical connection to the concept of liberty, Americans feel compelled to relate their every action to it. Teleologically, they have found it difficult to imagine an end of history that does not include on some level a universal commitment to freedom and democracy, and they also believe—with good reason—that their nation has and will continue to play the central role in attaining this state of affairs. Many Americans do not subscribe to such a grandiose vision of their political community, and American identity encompasses other norms and beliefs as well. The idea of American mission, however, occupies a prominent role in Americans’ self-understanding, and it has injected optimism, confidence, and self-referentialism into its engagement with a sometimes dangerous world. This missionary disposition has stemmed not only from a national identity that naturally integrates a sense of purpose and destiny but also from a culture that has historically included a strong philanthropic streak. Private American philanthropic efforts, religious missionary activity, and a collective identity encouraging such behavior have been mutually reinforcing features of America’s engagement with the world.

Religion has contributed significantly to the elaboration of this belief system. The earliest expression of the missionary spirit in America came from John Winthrop, who famously declared, “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of

7. This observation applies to the legitimacy of regime types rather than regimes themselves. Throughout its history, the United States has supported many authoritarian governments willing to protect American interests, often preferring them to democratic alternatives less supportive of U.S. goals.
all the people are upon us.”10 The Puritans’ eschatology and emphasis on the Old Testament focused their attention on biblical passages, including Exodus, the parable of Noah’s Ark, and the Revelation of St. John, that seemed to tell them that their landing on a strange new continent marked the beginning of a new era in history in which they had become “God’s new Israel.”11 Reading these passages within the framework of their covenant theology led the Puritans to believe that they were given a specific role in helping God to accomplish his grand plan for humanity.12 This belief has remained potent throughout American history, as Richard Carwardine explains: “That God acts not just through individuals but through nations, that every nation has a particular role to play in God’s scheme of things, and that the role assigned to America is something quite special and distinct from that assigned to other nations is a set of beliefs that has undergirded much American thinking throughout her history.”13 In order for this religious construct to influence in practice the decisions of U.S. policymakers, however, it had to remain vital in the broader culture from which it was drawn. American society in 1898 supported such a culture.

Religious Norms, Culture, and National identity in 1898

It perhaps can go without saying, but America was a predominately Christian nation in the 1890s, and Protestantism supplied the culture with its dominant religious motifs. According to one study from 1893, out of 62.6 million Americans, 49.6 million were Protestant and 7.3 million were Catholics.14 As Martin E. Marty wrote,

“Protestantism had so molded the outlook, morals, mores, customs, and standards of the nation that church and world were virtually indistinguishable.”15 As in other periods of American history, a wide diversity of faith traditions jockeyed for the loyalty of Americans. During a period of unprecedented immigration and urbanization, the proliferation of sects, schisms, and ethnic cloisters ensured that no narrow view could presume to speak for the whole nation.16 Even so, the centrality of Christianity was clear, and Catholicism had not yet achieved sufficient stature to seriously challenge Protestants’ dominance of the national culture.

From this fertile soil liberal Protestantism or modernism, a theological response to Darwin’s materialist ontology, emerged in the 1890s. Modernists resented the notion that as theologians they should have to choose between science and religion,17 instead defending a biblical hermeneutic that explicitly embraced scientific developments on the presumption that God’s truths cannot be contrary to science.18 Radical modernist Gerald Birney Smith of the Chicago Divinity School, for example, advocated an “empirical theology” that would “draw its inspiration from the world in which we live.”19 Another modernist, Paul Carus, put it like this: “The nature of religious truth is the same as that of scientific truth. There is but one truth.”20 Liberal Protestantism was thus able to accommodate itself to Darwinism.

It also produced the social gospel movement. Social gospel theology embraced the temporal, earthly dimensions of human existence in addition to the divine, spiritual attributes that ordinarily provide religions with their cosmological contexts. Followers of the social gospel felt concern for the physical as well as spiritual well-being of individuals, prompting them to engage in extensive outreach to the poor, missionary activities overseas, and antitobacco and anti-alcohol agitation. As Merle Curti makes clear, the social gospel

did not create the American habit of supporting overseas charitable activities; such engagements characterized American private actions from the time of the founding. Notably, the bulk of philanthropic activity either originated from Christian groups or was framed by others as having roots in Christian charity.\textsuperscript{21} What the social gospel theology did was help to ground this impulse in the concept of progress, which leading exponents such as Washington Gladden and Josiah Strong described using contemporary evolutionist vocabulary.\textsuperscript{22} As Arthur A. Ekirch summarized, “Evolution helped turn religion from its concentration on a fixed dogma and absolutist theology to an ethics of social justice. God and church became active agents in reform, and evolution and progress part of a divine plan. Thus the religious rationalization contributed to a corollary belief in progress and a willingness on the part of churches to take the lead in programs of social change.”\textsuperscript{23} The social gospel’s emergence in the 1890s demonstrates the extent to which American Christianity had grappled with and been altered by intellectual currents such as evolutionism and liberalism-modernism. It also shows how religion could shape and underpin social—and by extension, political—engagement and reform.\textsuperscript{24}

Liberal Protestantism influenced U.S. foreign policy in two ways. First, the cultural hegemony of Protestantism, coupled with the intellectual impregnability of evolutionism, meant that liberal-Protestant ideas shaped public discourse at a basic level. Its assumptions so pervaded American public life in 1898 that politicians would unreflectively articulate their policy goals using liberal Protestant language. As Kenton Clymer observed, “to many Americans Protestant beliefs were very much a part of American nationalism. .. Implicit in all of these forces—nationalism, humanitarianism, imperialism—was a sense of mission.”\textsuperscript{25} More directly, some leaders seemed to believe it to be their duty to bring their nation’s actions in line with millennial history, which under liberal Protestantism meant steady progress toward the kingdom of God. According to H. Richard Niebuhr, millennial thinking was the overarching motif of late-nineteenth-century American theology. While

\textsuperscript{21} Curti, \textit{American Philanthropy Abroad}.
\textsuperscript{25} Clymer, \textit{Protestant Missionaries in the Philippines}, 11.
only a minority may have believed at any one time that the millen- 
nium was at hand, the kingdom of God paradigm was widely 
accepted by Protestants (and, somewhat ironically, by many Catho-
lics, too) as an accurate rendition of the structure and flow of 
history. Millennial thinking helped shaped foreign policy by 
encouraging a more universalist perspective, by adding urgency to 
how Americans conceived of their relationship with the world, 
and by inspiring some to demand moral accountability.

Part of the attraction of millennialism in the 1890s was the relative 
painlessness of its most commonly espoused variant, postmillen-
nialism. Most nonfundamentalist Protestants in the 1890s were post-
millennialists, including adherents of the social gospel. 
Postmillennialists regard people as God’s partners in eschatological 
history, with a responsibility to prod human progress towards its 
culminating utopia. Unlike premillennialists, their end of history 
lacks the violent cataclysm of the apocalypse. Instead, postmillen-
nialists expect that the end of history will be achieved incremen-
tally. Americans in the 1890s often subscribed to a collectivist 
notion of this eschatology, moreover, wherein states themselves 
can assist the Providential cause. In this they simply updated the 
traditional civil-religious position that collectivities, meaning the 
United States, have divine significance in addition to individuals.

Americans also believed that God actively directed human affairs 
within history. Providence was not, in the 1890s, a watchmaker God. 
The Puritans brought the idea of an interested, intervening God with 
them to America’s shores, and the colonists’ unlikely success in 
the Revolutionary War provided apparent empirical support for 
it. By the 1890s, the belief that Providence had created the 
United States because it was intended to play a special role in the 
unfolding of divine history was deeply entrenched in the American 
psyche. The main question was whether Americans should play 
an active role in the cosmic drama or whether they should focus on 
keeping their own house in order lest they reverse God’s favor-
able dispensation towards them. One Spanish-American War

Schuster, 1990), 167.
28. Michael Lienesch, Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Chris-
29. The Puritans adhered to a Providential reading of history, but they were 
neither historicists, in the sense of thinking that meaning can be found within 
history, nor progressives, in the sense of believing that history progresses linearly. 
(I am indebted to Wilson Carey McWilliams for this insight, shared long ago.)
31. Ibid., xxix.
pamphleteer, the Reverend L. B. Hartman, offered a decidedly assertive answer. His argument merits attention because it links the ideas discussed above directly to American foreign policy.

Hartman argued not only that God works through nations as well as individuals to achieve his purposes, but also that the United States itself was prophesied throughout the Bible to be God’s instrument at that particular historical juncture. 32 “Thus without the least consciousness of presumption or extravagance,” he declared, “we recognize our republic as the politico-religious handmaid of Providence in the aggressive civilization of the world.” 33 While Hartman insisted that the United States was chosen to serve this role because it had a perfect government, he also insisted that the United States had a perfect government because God wanted it to have a perfect government. 34 The equation of America with divine will, normally a latent and merely implicit aspect of America’s civil religion, was explicit in Hartman’s book. His formula thus serves as a prototype of jingoistic thinking:

As in the past, even so in the present, God utilizes governmental powers to work out the heaven-ordained mission of His truth and His plans. … We cannot but believe that our own glorious Republic, for this very reason, is thus favored and elected. … Our Republic has been created and ordained to do a specific work, to serve the cause of freedom, humanity, and civilization, even in fields unsought which have been thrust upon her; and although her mission may involve the sacrifice of treasure and even life itself, yet the God of nations will hold her responsible for the discharge of her divinely appointed duty—a duty whose voice shall not be silenced until Anglo-Saxon institutions shall prevail in all lands and become the civil heritage of all nations and tribes and peoples. 35

For those who might have suspected that Josiah Strong and Albert Beveridge were outliers in the earnestness with which they expressed Anglo-Saxon Christian jingoism, Reverend Hartman and the political leaders quoted below indicate otherwise.

33. Ibid., 53.
34. Hartman’s language reveals a worldview wherein American democracy is worthy of esteem not because it “works” or has practical utility in the accomplishment of justice or some other tangible political good, but because it is, platonically, capital “g” Good: “Our Republic is not an accidental or fortuitous aggregation of political elements, but rather God’s own thought formulated and crystallized into a government according to His own Divine ideal, and in harmony with his own eternal purposes; and therefore, they who fought to maintain its integrity and uphold its institutions, fought for God and His cause.” Ibid., 31–32.
35. Ibid., 34–36, 38, 93–94.
Late-nineteenth-century American Christianity’s postmillennial fixation with collective progress towards the kingdom of God encouraged an activist, moralistic approach to foreign policy. It would not be fair to say that this theological perspective caused Americans to start the Spanish-American War, but it certainly made that choice easier by making it more morally attractive than it otherwise might have seemed.

Historical Background of the Spanish-American War

The moral particulars of the Spanish-Cuban conflict tapped directly into the jingoistic vein of American nationalism. In the Cuban insurrection of 1895, Cuban nationalists inspired by José Martí attempted forcibly to end Spanish rule over their island. Spain’s hold on its unwilling colony had been shaky for some time. Throughout the nineteenth century, revolutions periodically broke out on the island due to the cruelty and exploitation of Spanish governance, and each uprising had captured the attention of an American public divided between those supporting the island’s independence and those coveting Cuba as a potential new territory of the United States. The longest of these uprisings lasted from 1868 to 1878. Called the Ten Years War, it generated a strong sentiment in the United States that Spanish colonialism in Cuba should end. The re-emergence of the Cuban independence struggle in 1895 thus found an audience in the United States that was familiar with, and receptive to, the Cubans’ plight.

The Spanish general Victoriano Weyler, a notoriously brutal veteran of the Ten Years War, was sent to bring the stalemated conflict in 1896 to a decisive conclusion. He instituted a reconcentration policy, which entailed herding the rural population into

36. For an excellent overview of Spanish-American relations, see James W. Cortada, Two Nations Over Time: Spain and the United States, 1776–1977 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978). Cortada shows how Cuba had been a flash point for Spanish-American relations throughout the nineteenth century; by removing Cuba from play, the Spanish-American War thus had the ironic effect of improving relations between the two states.

fenced compounds. The people held in these glorified cages were not provided with sufficient food or sanitation, and as a result large numbers of Cuban civilians died of starvation and disease. Those leaving the compounds to forage for food were summarily executed as presumed rebel sympathizers. In addition, both the Spanish and the rebels, in their efforts to harass and starve each other, adopted policies of burning arable fields, destroying crops, and slaughtering livestock. These practices squeezed the population from both ends and made it difficult for relief to reach them.\textsuperscript{38} Fair estimates place the number of civilian deaths at 100,000,\textsuperscript{39} though other estimates ranged from 300,000 to as high as 500,000 (the latter figure commonly cited in propaganda pamphlets). As McKinley's first biographer, Charles Olcott, wrote, "smallpox, dysentery, typhus, and yellow fever added to the horrors of starvation. Men, women, and children, after wandering through the streets in helpless beggary, died by the thousands. The fertile fields became a desert and gaunt ruins marred the landscape where prosperous towns and humming factories once stood."\textsuperscript{40} It was the reconcentration policy and accompanying challenges to Cuba's population, more than anything else, that galvanized American interest in the Spanish-Cuban conflict.

As a result of his infamous policy, Weyler acquired the nickname "the butcher," and he confirmed Americans' worst prejudices about Spanish civilization as cruel and morally primitive. As a result of reconcentration, Americans came to regard the Cuban crisis as a natural expression of the Spanish regime's decrepit character. In one popular narrative history of the country, for instance, the author wrote of Spain, "The virulent, obstinate, even brutal ignorance of the masses cannot be penetrated by any sentiment of sympathy with high aspiration or disinterested devotion to principle. ... The war with Cuba was but an episode; yet it was also a legitimate outgrowth of Spain's policies, which...have been consistently cruel and unjust toward her colonists, from her earliest occupation of American territory."\textsuperscript{41} Spain became the symbol of an earlier, less enlightened age when darkness and superstition (i.e., Catholicism) clouded men's minds. As one writer put it, "In the great march of civilization of Europe and America, Spain has sullenly and uniformly remained in the rear guard, advancing only under

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{38} S. R. Calthrop, \textit{The Wars of 1898} (Pamphlet, 1899), 6–7.
\bibitem{41} B. Essex Winthrop, \textit{Spain and the Spaniards} (New York: Street & Smith, 1899), 244–45.
\end{thebibliography}
compulsion, and retarding, rather than helping, that onward march toward the goal of perfection which Christianity and civilization have ever before them, and which, though still in the far-off distance, is year by year less distant from those who strive honestly to reach it."\(^{42}\) Charles Francis Adams testily complained: "I want someone to point out a single good thing in law, or science, or art, or literature—material, moral, or intellectual—which has resulted to the race of man upon earth from Spanish domination in America." He added, “From the year 1492 down, the history of Spain and Spanish domination has undeniably been one long series of crimes and violations of natural law.”\(^{43}\)

Calls for armed intervention to “rescue Cuba” became more urgent and insistent after William McKinley took office in 1897. “Compliance with evil is worse than war,” argued one pamphleteer, continuing, “One thing, as Christian men, I hold we cannot do. We cannot, as Christian men, tolerate the statement the unendurable woes of Cuba are no business of these United States... The cause of freedom in Cuba is the cause of God and man.”\(^{44}\) Washington Gladden added, “The constant sight of unspeakable cruelties has become intolerable; we will bear it no longer... The conduct of Spain in Cuba up to date is a crime against civilization.”\(^{45}\)

The movement toward intervention acquired substantial momentum on February 15, 1898, when the battleship *Maine* blew up in the Havana harbor, killing 266 Americans. The explosion came as a shock to everybody—Cubans, Spaniards, and Americans alike. A naval investigation concluded in late March than an external explosion rather than a spontaneous combustion inside the ship’s coal bunkers caused the *Maine* to sink. Few Americans in positions of responsibility seriously believed that Spain intentionally sabotaged the battleship, yet they still blamed Spain for its sinking because Spanish authorities had been responsible for its safety. Moreover, the fact that *someone* was able to sink the *Maine* further confirmed

\(^{42}\) Charles Henry Butler, *The Voice of the Nation, the President is Right: A Series of Papers on our Past and Present Relations with Spain* (New York: George Munro’s Sons, 1898), 54.

\(^{43}\) Charles Francis Adams, "*Imperialism*” and “The Tracks of our Forefathers” (Boston: Dana Estes, 1899), 6–7. Cortada notes, on the other hand, that this cultural disdain was mutual between the two peoples. He observes that Spaniards regarded the United States as inferior and “marked by vulgarity and a lack of refinements,” in Cortada, *Two Nations Over Time*, 124.

\(^{44}\) W. S. Rainsford, *Our Duty to Civilization, or Who is my Neighbor* (New York: Pamphlet, 1898), 6, 13, 16–17. Rainsford continued, “We are pushed to do the work of God by elemental forces which no politician, however shrewd, could create, control or gainsay;” 18.

to Americans that Spanish rule in Cuba was inherently corrupt and unreliable. Thus, as the journalist Henry Watterson wrote, “Within an hour after the finding of the naval investigations report was known to the country, no one doubted that war was inevitable.”46

Debating Intervention

Congress had been channeling public agitation for intervention into Cuba since the insurrection first erupted in 1895. As they passed a series of resolutions articulating their opinion of the Cuban crisis and introduced petitions that had been sent to them by their constituents—sometimes by the legislatures of the states they represented—they gave official expression to the sentiments animating the U.S. public’s interest in the Spanish-Cuban War. By February 1898, the pro-interventionist position had attained critical mass. For example, a Republican senator, William E. Mason of Illinois, introduced a resolution on February 8 calling for intervention on the island. The American people, according to the resolution, “have patiently waited, not wishing (even indirectly) to interfere with the affairs of other nations, until the stench on our very borders has become a stain upon our continent and a blot on our Christian civilization. The people of the United States, demanding no personal profit, having no fear and seeking no favor, clear and conscious as to the justice of our position, do, in the presence of the civilized nations of the world and in the name of justice and liberty, demand that the so-called war in Cuba must cease.”47 The language of this resolution was typical of those introduced during this period.

By far the most commonly heard rationales used to justify U.S. intervention into Cuba were those based on a construction of U.S. national identity that held the United States to be a just, humane civilization that was duty-bound to aid an oppressed people and to punish their wicked persecutors. In the House, members drew a sharp contrast between corrupt Spanish civilization on the one hand and the enlightened, providentially favored United States on the other. Rep. William C. Arnold (R-Penn.) insisted, for example, “In this emergency Providence points the way, duty bids us move on the pathway of progressive civilization, humanity demands that we march resolutely forward, and justice insists that we punish deceit, perfidy, treachery, cruelty, tyranny, and savagery,

47. “Speech by Mr. Mason of 8 February 1898,” *Congressional Record*, 55th Cong., 2d Sess., 1534–35.
which are the predominant traits of Spanish character.” Rep. Harry Skinner (Pop-N.Car.) added:

After all, it may be Divine design and retributive justice that has brought this proud, tyrannical, long-sinning nation to judgment, to confront the Republic of liberty, equality, justice, and civilization, where the wage, the issue, is the triumph of justice, truth, liberty, humanity. With the God of these attributes and the Father of nations to direct our councils in peace and our armies and navies in war, we should not, we do not, fear the results...[Our forefathers] were providentially guided to a home and refuge then beyond the sunset. Their first work was to dedicate this country to God and liberty. ...The same Providence, in his own time and way, cares for the starving Cubans. He has given this country to them as their promised land, and these people as their guardians, defenders, and protectors.

By choosing to employ this sort of rhetoric to frame U.S. intervention in Cuba, legislators consciously identified U.S. purpose and character with providential history. They characterized the anticipated conflict between Spain and the United States as a pivotal moment in divine history, when the principles of American government, sanctioned by Providence, would be vindicated on the battlefield—when U.S. foreign policy could become a means for advancing human progress. Some speeches were explicit on this point, as when Representative Mason S. Peters (Dem/Pop-Kans.) declared to Congress:

A war between the United States and Spain at this time would be fraught with deep significance. It would result not only in the freedom of Cuba, but the exaltation of a principle which would be an object lesson to the world for all time. It would not be simply the United States pitted against Spain; it would be the opposing forces which have been at work shaping human destiny through all the ages. On the one hand, the shriveled and decrepit survival of a semi-barbarous system of oppression, cruelty, inhumanity, and violence; on the other, civil and religious liberty, equality, human rights, progress. On the one hand, the divine right of kings; on the other, the divine right of man. Why need we shrink from such a conflict? Such a war would be a blessing to the world.

In the upper chamber, Senator William V. Allen (Pop-Neb.) urged the same point as he noted that a U.S. victory would fulfill the American mission and help to spread the nation's ideals beyond its borders. Senator Allen grounded this claim on the observation

49. Ibid., 3211–12.
that U.S. ideals were of a universal nature, and that all people could and should enjoy them:

Our ancestors declared to the world that all men are by nature free and equal and entitled to certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They did not confine themselves to the inhabitants of the colonies; they did not limit the declaration to the people of the Western Hemisphere; but they held that all men, under whatever sun they might be born or whatever soil they might live, were created free and equal and entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...I hold human freedom and the right to self-government is God-given and inalienable, and whoever violates it flies in the face of Providence and wrests from the individual the most precious gift of all.51

His colleague, Senator Clarence D. Clark (R-Wyo.) added, “God is on the side of the right, and in this coming contest we are in the right. We stand for freedom of peoples and for representative government, for free institutions and national honor.”52

During the early months of 1898, it seemed only President William McKinley still sought to maintain the peace with Spain.53 The legislature tried to force his hand almost from the moment he took office, but McKinley only acted after determining that the Senate would declare war without him and that he would thereby lose any power to shape the course of events.54 In addition, the president risked losing control of his party, who in turn would become vulnerable to a Democratic takeover in that year’s congressional elections.55 If he were to retain his authority and ability to shape events, he had to act immediately. On April 11, 1898, therefore, President McKinley gave a speech to Congress in which he outlined his proposals for Cuba and explained how American intervention there would be morally and legally justifiable.

In his speech, McKinley called the reconcentration camps “a new and inhuman phase happily unprecedented in the modern history of civilized Christian peoples” and noted that the “present revolution has ... by the exercise of cruel, barbarous, and uncivilized practices of warfare, shocked the sensibilities and offended the humane sympathies of our people.” Diplomacy between the United States

52. “Speech of 16 April 1898,” Congressional Record, 55th Cong., 2d Sess., 3968.
53. Trask, The War with Spain in 1898, 56.
and Spain, the president noted, had thus far failed to secure an acceptable resolution to the Cuban crisis, nor did one appear to be forthcoming. Continuance of the conflict was intolerable. It was therefore his “duty . . . to seek to bring about an immediate termination to the war.” 56 Two possible courses of action followed from this position: recognition of the Cuban rebels, which would free up the United States to send them material aid, or intervention by the United States itself to impose its own peace. McKinley preferred the latter course and explicitly rejected extending recognition to the Cuban republic, a decision that would consume more of the Congress’s time and attention than the rest of his message combined. ”Recognition of the independence of Cuba is impracticable and indefensible,” he explained. 57 If the United States was going to intervene, in other words, it would do so unilaterally, for its own reasons.

After explaining his policy of nonrecognition, McKinley moved on to the other portion of the message that everyone had been waiting for—the arguments laying out the grounds for intervention. He provided, in all, four reasons supporting America’s contemplated military action. First, “in the cause of humanity and to put an end to the barbarities, bloodshed, starvation, and horrible misery now existing in Cuba, the halting of which was specially our duty, for it is right at our door”; second, to protect Americans in Cuba; third, to protect American trade and business interests; and fourth, to arrest a conflict whose proximity to the United States posed a threat to U.S. peace and security. McKinley noted how the conditions to which he referred led to the sinking of the Maine. He did not accuse Spain of actually seeking the battleship (“That remains to be fixed”) but noted simply that the event dramatically illustrated how Americans could not feel safe in their persons or property in or around Cuba. The situation was intolerable. “In the name of humanity, in the name of civilization, in behalf of endangered American interests which give us the right and duty to speak and to act, the war in Cuba must stop.” 58

McKinley’s message launched the Congress into a protracted debate in which it haggled over the language of a joint resolution that would declare America’s purposes in the Cuban intervention. On April 13, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations initiated the formal process when it presented to the full Senate a draft of

56. “Message of the President of the United States Communicated to the Two Houses of Congress on the Relations of the United States to Spain by Reason of Warfare on the Island of Cuba, 11 April 1898,” Papers of William McKinley, microfilm.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
a joint resolution directing the president “to use the land and naval forces of the United States” to force Spain’s withdrawal from Cuba. The introduction to the resolution explained that the United States was preparing to become involved in Cuba because “the abhorrent conditions which have existed for more than three years on the island of Cuba, so near our own borders, has shocked the moral conscience of the people of the United States, have been a disgrace to Christian civilization… and can no longer be endured.” The resolution proposed as a response to these conditions that the United States use military force to liberate Cuba from Spanish rule.59

Accompanying the resolution was a report that detailed the Senate’s motives. This report provides insight into the collective judgment of the Senate regarding the legitimacy of their country’s involving itself in the sovereign affairs of another state, and it offered both legal and political arguments to bolster America’s case. It began by noting the numerous resolutions regarding the Cuban insurrection that senators had proposed over the previous three years, which indicated the longstanding interest of the United States in the crisis, and it also discussed the destruction of the Maine, which it characterized as part of the “unity of events” in Cuba and the product of either Spanish intent or negligence. The “unity of events” stemmed from the “duplicity, perfidy, and cruelty of the Spanish character,” which was ultimately responsible for all the evils that were then visiting the island.60 “Justification for intervention is strengthened in such cases as the present,” the report noted, “where the oppressions by a state of its subjects have been so inveterate, atrocious, and sanguinary as to require intervention by other nations in the interests of humanity and the peace of the world, for the purpose of overthrowing that government and establishing or recognizing another in its place as the only means of extirpating an otherwise incurable and dangerous evil.”61 The message of the committee report, in short, was that the United States was going to intervene in Cuba because Spain did not exercise its sovereignty over the island in a manner acceptable to a U.S. republic that had the power and self-bestowed authority to judge what constituted proper governance.

The committee report, however, did not speak for a unanimous Congress. Immediately after it was read, a minority report was presented to the Senate that demanded “the immediate recognition of the Republic of Cuba, as organized on that island, as a free,
independent, and sovereign power among the nations of the world." This proposal engendered a fierce debate: who should create the sovereign government that would replace Spain's in Cuba: the people of Cuba, or the United States? Most of the floor debate over the wording of the war resolution remained in the Senate after the Speaker of the House, Thomas B. Reed (R-Maine), silenced floor discussion on the subject. Each senator approached the debate over the wording of the joint resolution as a chance not only to argue about recognizing Cuba, but also to record, both for his constituents and for posterity, his broader views on the proposed intervention. As a result, the speeches quickly became models of late nineteenth-century U.S. jingoism, replete with Darwinian assumptions and millennial aspirations.

Senator David Turpie (D-Ind.), for instance, after declaring the moral necessity of recognizing Cuba (he was a signatory of the minority resolution), averred, "I shall have confidence that God in His providence will overrule these gigantic evils for the good of liberty and the welfare of mankind." Senator George Gray (D-Del.) added, "We cannot forever keep our place and say we are not our brother's keeper. God Himself will hold us to responsibility if we continue to plead thus." Senator Charles W. Fairbanks (R-Ind.), an erstwhile opponent of the war, now regarded intervention to be "a duty divinely imposed." He argued that "we are morally bound to put an end to the wrongs, the outrages, the evils which flow from Spanish rule," because the Cubans, though "not of our race, it is true, [are] fellow-beings created in the image of our Maker," and Spain "has not fairly emerged from the night of the Middle Ages." The intervention in Fairbanks's view was reflective of U.S. national identity: "It is instinctive with us to desire to see people who are oppressed freed from the oppressor and secure in the God-given, inalienable privileges of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness... To the high and holy cause of humanity and the vindication of our national honor we dedicate the lives and fortunes of the Republic."

Each speaker seemed determined to outdo the last in his characterization of the United States as a noble, divinely favored nation seeking to achieve a higher justice in Cuba. Senator Shelby M. Cullom (R-Ill.) called intervention "our duty to God, humanity, liberty and ourselves" and "our plain duty as a Christian

64. Ibid., 3842.
65. Ibid., 3844–46.
people.” Senator Edward O. Wolcott (R-Colo.) thundered to applause that resulted in a clearing of the galleries:

The war which is already upon us, whatever the phraseology of our resolutions, must be fought because it is the manifest destiny of this Republic to stand forever on the Western Hemisphere the sentinel of liberty. It must come, because if we fail to listen to the voice of the suffering or the cry of the downtrodden upon this continent, we shall be untrue to those principles of liberty, humanity and Christianity upon which this country is founded as upon a rock.67

Senators from every party and from every region of the country echoed these sentiments, which suggests that they regarded the Cuban intervention to be an expression and vindication of America’s religious values.

Providence was a recurring theme in the speeches, and references to the “God of battles”68 appeared often as well. As Senator Joseph R. Hawley, a Connecticut Republican, argued, “We claim to be at the head of the world in wisdom, freedom, law, the liberty of our Constitution, and our system in general. Evidently, Mr. President, we cannot expect that we should drift through the world, being thus crowded along, you may say, Divine Providence, to this magnificent position, without taking some of the responsibilities that naturally fall on such a power and such a situation.”69 Representative “Fighting Joe” Cannon was particularly grandiloquent on the subject. After remarking that he favored “a holy peace” that could only be reached by passing through “the brazen gate of war,” he offered this assessment of America’s situation:

Mr. President, upon whose invitation are we entering Cuba now? ... It is more than invitation; it is a command. It was uttered from the Mount, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” and the United States, in obedience to the command, will enter Cuba against the protests of all the governments of the earth and make peace there forever. If we keep our motive pure and our purpose high, we will be sustained by Providence. We will vindicate ourselves to our consciences, to the wisdom and honor of the world, and to the day of judgment; and when the war shall have ended the United States will be able, I trust, to write a story of the deed in this one

67. Ibid., 3893.
68. Senator Samuel Pasco (D-Fla.), announced for instance, “The people of Florida will accept the verdict which we will here render after a deliberate consideration of the situation as it has been presented, and will meet whatever result may follow calmly and courageously, and in full confidence that the God of Battles will give to us the ultimate victory.” “Speech of 16 April 1898,” Congressional Record, 55th Cong., 2d Sess., 3970.
69. Ibid., 3959.
sentence: “The hand of God moved this country to destroy in Cuba the divine right of kings and to establish there the diviner right of the people.”

The debate that provided the pretext for the speeches was still actively engaged, however. Senator James H. Berry (D-Ark.) wanted to recognize the Cuban Republic immediately so that there would not “lurk in the minds of people both at home and abroad that we mean something more than we say,” that is, he wanted to make it clear that intervention would not take place “on account of any desire to acquire additional territory.” Senator Benjamin R. Tillman (D-S.C.), meanwhile, opposed McKinley’s version of the idea of American mission in no uncertain terms:

We propose to take Spain’s place and become the policeman of the Western Continent and keep in order on that island the Latin races that havesettled there. We cannot afford it. Duty demands that we expel the Spanish robbers and tyrants. There our duty ends. We cannot afford, Mr. President, to set up any government there. We cannot afford to do anything except to recognize the existing government and let them work out their own redemption, as the other Spanish-American Republics have had to do. They have had their revolutions and counter-revolutions. I do not believe the people of that race are capable of self-government.

He then made his position unambiguous: “I, for one, stand here and protest in the name of American freemen, in the name of decency, of Christianity, of fairness and justice and peace...that we do not intend to annex the island.”

Two issues were conjoined in the speeches of Tillman, Berry, and the other opponents of McKinley’s plan—the recognition of Cuban independence, and the disavowal of any intent to annex the island. Senator Henry M. Teller (D-Colo.) ended this debate by separating these issues in an amendment to the war resolution that expressly rejected both annexation and recognition. The joint resolution, after including the so-called “Teller amendment,” passed the Senate, 67 to 21. Eventually, the House followed suit by voice vote of 311 to 6. The president then signed the resolution, and Spain declared war. On April 25, the United States declared war in return, and the Spanish-American War was officially underway.

70. Ibid., 3943–44.
72. Ibid., 3891.
73. “Speech of 16 April 1898,” Congressional Record, 55th Cong., 2d Sess., 3954.
Conclusion

America’s decision to insert itself into the Spanish-Cuban conflict was motivated in substantial part by the commitment of its leaders in 1898 to the idea of American mission. The idea of American mission posits that the United States embodies universal virtues and that mankind can only benefit by their suffusion. The debate preceding the Spanish-American War demonstrates that Americans living in 1898 adhered strongly to this view and were committed to spreading the “blessings” of U.S. civilization to the citizens of Cuba. It reveals, furthermore, that the idea of American mission to which Americans adhered had a distinctly religious coloration that reflected the norms of the nation’s mainstream religious culture. The speeches excerpted here offered arguments representative of those made throughout the prewar debate, on both sides of the aisle. Regardless of their position on recognizing Cuban independence, legislators and pamphleteers believed that their nation’s behavior should be defined by reference to Christian values, including the duty to help the downtrodden. Providence, they believed, would favor the United States in the proposed struggle because Spain was morally retrograde while the United States acted as a proper Christian Republic. By acting in a manner they believed to be consistent with God’s will, Americans would also be taking one more step towards the kingdom of God, this one crucially involving non-Americans.

When Americans embarked upon their new, internationalist course in 1898, they did so believing that their actions needed to reflect their nation’s deepest values and traditions. Even if many of the ideological underpinnings of that initial foray into vindicationism are now obsolete, such as social Darwinism, the general sense remains that the United States has a duty to honor its destiny by changing the world, bit by bit, to encourage conformity with America’s universalist values. This is one legacy of the Spanish-American war that continues to exert a pull on the American psyche in its engagement with the world. Previous research has summarized religion’s role in the postwar debates over imperialism. Here it was shown that religious notions structured the prewar debate as well. Ideas animate behavior and guide ambitions, and religious ideas in particular can generate powerful moral imperatives to action. There is no way of knowing whether the United States would have chosen to start the Spanish-American war if it had a different religious culture, but deep-rooted religious ideas pertaining to Providential destiny, for example, certainly seem to have made that choice easier. At a minimum, the prominence of religious language in the prewar speeches that framed and justified
America’s intervention into the Spanish-American War shows that American leaders believed these ideas to have social and political salience. It is impossible to know with certainty which portions of these speeches were “mere rhetoric” rather than expressions of true motives. Nonetheless, by contributing to the legitimating pretext of a pivotal foreign policy debate, these speeches ensured a place of continuing prominence for religion in America’s national identity.