

 **Article REVIEW**

**David Zietsma.** “‘Sin Has No History’: Religion, National Identity, and U.S. Intervention, 1937-1941.” *Diplomatic History* 31.3 (June 2007): 531-565. doi:10.1111/j.1467-7709.2007.00630.x. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1111/j.1467-7709.2007.00630.x> .

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**O**n 3 September 1941, after Japanese military forces had expanded their occupation of the Asian mainland to southern Indochina, but with Japanese civilian leaders still professing a desire to avoid war with the United States, the *Washington Post* published a political cartoon that reflected the widespread American righteous indignation at Japan. In the background, a stern Uncle Sam, wearing a policeman’s cap and accompanied by nightstick-wielding British and Dutch police officers, grimly follows a set of bloody footprints that lead from the prostrate body of China up to a bespectacled midget in schoolboy dress who represents Japan. As the policemen approach, obviously intent on thrashing the midget for his misdeeds, the figure of Japan asks an earnestly perplexed Secretary of State Cordell Hull: “Where is the Sunday School?” Captioned “Sudden Piety,” the cartoon alluded to the way a religious culture infused both the universal principles of right international conduct that “Parson Hull” had upheld in negotiations with the Japanese and the determination of American nationalists to punish Japan for its crimes.<sup>1</sup>

In his highly original article, David Zietsma, a professor at Redeemer University College in Ontario, presents a stimulating argument that the “increasing U.S. belligerence” toward Japan and Germany in the five years before the attack on Pearl Harbor “was not simply a reasonable response to objective international threats,” but also part of a revival of a sense of the United States as a righteous nation destined to oppose evil in the world (534). According to Zietsma, that sense of righteousness, underpinned by a “neo-orthodox Christian realist discourse focused on ‘original sin,’” gradually eclipsed a “religious modernist discourse” that had inclined many Americans to anti-interventionist positions (534). In the early 1930s, Zietsma explains, Americans had drawn chiefly on religious modernism to reaffirm their identity as a chosen nation. “As a result, a narrative of the United States as a ‘good neighbor’ emerged as the constitutive framework of national identity” (537). However, in the late 1930s, especially after the Munich conference of September 1938, disillusionment with attempts to promote peaceful resolution of conflicts spurred “a shift away from the discourse of neighborliness” toward “an image of the United States as a righteous nation” witnessing an international struggle between good and evil (542, 543). “Between 1939 and December 1941,” Zietsma concludes, “the hierarchy of evil narrative produced an illusion of righteousness that inherently required a foreign policy of increasing war belligerence” (561).

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan G. Utley, *Going to War with Japan, 1937-1941* (Knoxville, 1985), esp. 6; Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York, 2000), esp. 403-5; Kenneth S. Davis, *FDR: The War President, 1940-1943* (New York, 2000), esp. 315; and David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York, 1999), esp. 507.

Zietsma's provocative article is a significant contribution to the burgeoning study of the role of religion in the history of the foreign relations of the United States.<sup>2</sup> Its demonstration of the pervasiveness of religious language in debates about American foreign relations in the 1930s contributes to the growing evidence that religion deserves to be treated as a fundamental category of analysis, comparable in importance to race, class, and gender. It also enhances scholarly understanding of the ways relations with foreign countries have affected how Americans feel about the United States. In particular, the article shows how national identity can be reinvigorated not only through righteous antipathy to evil foreign "others" but also through affirmation of a positive international mission (in this case, as a peacemaker and good neighbor).<sup>3</sup>

"Sin Has No History" is based on impressive research and it is vigorously argued. However, some questions can be raised about the phrasing and evidence at specific points.

Zietsma is convincing when he writes that a cultural explanation is a necessary complement to strategic, economic, and geopolitical explanations of the increasingly belligerent and interventionist stances of Americans. In this vein, Zietsma's argument that "a culturally rooted religious narrative of national identity in part fostered the U.S. turn to intervention" is persuasive (564). However, he seems to overstate his case when he asserts that a cultural narrative was the primary determinant of political positions, for example when he writes that "The religious modernist roots of cultural 'anti-interventionism' produced a political anti-interventionist position" (553; emphasis added).

One of the points where Zietsma seems to exaggerate the importance of cultural constructs is when he writes, in relation to the controversial extension of U.S. assistance to the Soviet Union in 1941, that "aid to a country depended on its relative place within the hierarchy of good and evil, rather than on simply apparently real threats" (559). Before Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, many Americans abhorred the atheist Stalinist dictatorship as at least as evil as Nazi Germany. One day after the invasion, Acting Secretary of State Sumner Welles declared that the "doctrines of communistic dictatorship," especially the denial of religious freedom, were as "intolerable" as the doctrines of the Nazis. None the less, Welles argued, "a realistic

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, David S. Foglesong, "Roots of 'Liberation': American Images of the Future of Russia in the Early Cold War, 1948-1953," *The International History Review*, Vol. XXI, No. 1 (March 1999), 57-79; Andrew J. Rotter, "Christians, Muslims, and Hindus: Religion and U.S.-South Asian Relations," with comments by Robert Dean, Robert Buzzanco, and Patricia R. Hill, *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Fall 2000), 593-640; Seth Jacobs, "'Our System Demands the Supreme Being': The U.S. Religious Revival and the 'Diem Experiment,' 1954-55," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Fall 2001), 589-624; Dianne Kirby, ed., *Religion and the Cold War* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), Andrew Preston, "Bridging the Gap between the Sacred and the Secular in the History of American Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 30, No. 5 (November 2006), 783-812.

<sup>3</sup> On enmity and identity, see David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); David M. Kennedy, "Culture Wars: The Sources and Uses of Enmity in American History," in *Enemy Images in American History*, ed. Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase and Ursula Lemkuhl (Providence, 1997), 339-356, and Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination* (San Francisco, 1986).

America” needed to take action to halt and defeat Hitler’s plan for world conquest. The U.S. decision to provide aid to the U.S.S.R. in the summer of 1941 hinged not on the Soviet Union’s place in the hierarchy of evil but on the calculation that it was in the national interest to help one ruthless totalitarian regime against another. Having made that decision, President Franklin Roosevelt then sought to reposition the U.S.S.R. within the hierarchy of good and evil, particularly by making unfounded claims about freedom of religion in the Soviet Union. Roosevelt’s claims, which Zietsma highlights, initially provoked heated criticism and derision. Eventually, emphasis on the persistence of religious faith in Russia may have dampened some opposition to the extension of lend-lease aid to the U.S.S.R. in the fall of 1941, but the public and congressional approval of that aid stemmed primarily from the awareness that Russians were fighting a dangerous enemy with which the United States might soon be at war. In his effort to use this episode to demonstrate “the power of religious identity narratives,” Zietsma neglects how manipulative politicians can evade the constraints of those narratives.<sup>4</sup>

When a narrative or discourse is accorded such primacy, there is a danger that individual human agency can be obscured. In this article, Zietsma tends to take the words of major actors such as President Roosevelt as straightforward manifestations of a discourse, without sufficient critical attention to how FDR sought to affect those to whom his words were addressed. For example, Zietsma quotes Roosevelt’s statement to Groton School headmaster Endicott Peabody that his 1937 call for a “quarantine” of aggressor nations was “more Christian” than going to war with them and he cites the view of one of FDR’s internationalist friends that Roosevelt hoped in 1938 for “a neighborly ‘kind of Quaker non-intercourse’” (539). This treatment seems to neglect the vehemence of FDR’s denunciation of ruthless aggressors in his quarantine speech and to disregard the harsher impression he left with other interlocutors about his intention to deny trade to the aggressor nations. Fundamentally, Zietsma’s insistence that Roosevelt’s “sense of being an ‘American’ remained very much constituted within religious modernist discourse” leads him to overstate the extent to which FDR’s elastic creed confined that dissembling, chameleon-like politician (549).

To Zietsma, “actual foreign-policy results” such as the entrenchment of dictatorships in Latin America or the imposition of economic sanctions on Japan matter less (or are at least less interesting) than “the performative power of policy discourse” (538). Given that focus, it would be desirable to know more about the reception and resonance of the Roosevelt administration’s rhetoric. For example, Zietsma devotes two paragraphs to FDR’s message to Congress in January 1939 as an illustration of how the “renascent narrative of the United States as a righteous nation combating international evil” subsumed “good neighbor discourse,” yet he does not present any evidence of the impact on Congress or public opinion of FDR’s argument that America needed to defend religion, democracy, and good faith against storms from abroad (546-7). Zietsma’s argument seems questionable because much of the editorial commentary focused (critically) on the budgetary implications of FDR’s message (not his call to protect religious

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<sup>4</sup> Welles to Steinhardt, June 23, 1941, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1941*, Vol. I (Washington, 1958), 767; George C. Herring, Jr., *Aid to Russia 1941-1946: Strategy, Diplomacy, the Origins of the Cold War* (New York, 1973), 1-24. For further discussion, see David S. Foglesong, “American Hopes for the Transformation of Russia During the Second World War” (in Russian), *Novaia i Noveishaia Istoriiia*, #1, January 2003, 80-105, or Foglesong, *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”* (forthcoming, Cambridge University Press), chapter 4.

freedom). In addition, some of the editors who did comment on Roosevelt's reference to religion rejected "the role of world policeman" that they sensed was implicit in FDR's summons to protect the "morals and religion of all the earth."<sup>5</sup>

Despite some points where the power of religious discourses seems to be overstated, Zietsma's article makes a valuable contribution by showing that religion was often central to how Americans thought and talked about their role in the world on the eve of U.S. entry into the Second World War. Zietsma does not address the cultural underpinnings of Japan's road to war with the United States (which he briefly characterizes as a defensive response to U.S. intervention in East Asia). However, it might be useful to consider the extent to which religion underlay Japanese, as well as American, beliefs in the unique virtues and special missions of their chosen nations. Exploration of the way religious beliefs contributed to self-righteous nationalism on both sides would contribute to a balanced cultural perspective on the origins of the American-Japanese clash in 1941.

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*Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse*

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<sup>5</sup> Quotation from *Omaha World Herald* editorial, reprinted in "Press Comment on President's Message," *New York Times*, January 5, 1939. Among the 23 extracts from editorials, only one, from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, approvingly highlighted FDR's call for "the defense of religion." In "Democracy and Defense," a January 5, 1939 editorial not reproduced by the *New York Times*, the *Christian Science Monitor* hoped that Roosevelt's eloquent appeal for the defense of religion, democracy, and international good faith would instantly produce national unity, but that was not achieved. See, for example, the *Chicago Tribune's* condemnation of Roosevelt's "militarism" and his resort to the Wilsonian "ruse" of making the world safe for democracy in a front-page cartoon and the editorial, "Mr. Roosevelt Goes to War," January 6, 1939.