

American Identity in the Light of Christian Covenants

The Taiwanese ethnic groups have been claiming separate national identity since the 2004 Presidential election campaign. Taiwanese identity indeed calls for an elaborate deliberation of local political scientists. And comparatively speaking, American identity makes a stark contrast to Taiwanese one. Just as Samuel P. Huntington, an internationally well-known political scientist points out in his *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*, “The Americans are a political people. The Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, the constitutions of the states and the Constitution of 1787 explain their national existence” (Huntington, 24). This identification of nationality with political creed or value makes the Americans unique. They have still had only one Constitution and one system of government based on one set of political ideas. However, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants still constitute not only the premier but the largest ethnic entity on the American scene. American immigrants can conceivably become Americans by being fully assimilated into their culture and community (Huntington, 26-27). Inspired by Huntington’s statement, I intend to interpret American identity in terms of Protestants’ belief, that is, Christian Covenants.

The traditional identity of a people used to be based on the belief of the same tribal or ancestral originality. The American people, however, acquire their identity by means of a common set of political values, that is, liberty and equality. With the identity surpassing traditional boundaries, the American society becomes a melting pot of different peoples. An important factor related to the peculiarity is the notion of a covenant¹, which is originated from Biblical teachings, and which has been deeply rooted in the American society since the colonial period. In addition to the peculiarity of the notion, my M.A. thesis is on hermeneutics, that is, the way to explicate the Bible. Therefore, I am to some degree very familiar with the Biblical allusions. Moreover, the Taiwanese identity is such a big issue that many activists always intend to decide the Taiwan future via a referendum. Indeed, the explication

¹ According to dictionaries available to me, the word “covenant” is defined as follows: (1) formal agreement that is legally binding [*Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary*, fourth edition] (2) (in religion) God’s agreement with the human race or an agreement among members of a congregation [*The Newbury House Dictionary of American English*] (3) a formal solemn agreement between two or more people or groups [Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English] (4) A formal written legal agreement [*Cambridge International Dictionary of English*]

of the formation of American identity, in a sense, can help with our thinking and reasoning on this issue. These factors combine to motivate me to do a research on this topic “American Identity in the Light of Christian Identity.”

As to the methodology of this research, I would like to apply Ferdinand de Saussure’s structurism to analyze this topic. In *Course in General Linguistics*, he pointed out that “Everything that relates to the static side of our science is synchronic; everything that has to do with evolution is diachronic. Similarly, synchrony and diachrony designate respectively a language-state and an evolutionary phase” (Saussure, 81). I sincerely hope that I can analyze and explain the topic well in terms of its historicity and static side.

The ideal of liberty and democracy caused the people in the colonial period to regard Englishmen as foreigners. For the pilgrims cannot agree with the imperial system of Great Britain (Beer,135). Joseph Schumpeter, however, pointed out that the success of American independence depended on nationalism rather than the ideals of freedom and democracy. It was nationalism that led to the formation of American identity (Schumpeter,267). In addition, Arthur Schlesinger declared that the American independence was based on the common interests of the businessmen in the middle America and the farmers in the southern America (Schlesinger,31-37). On the other hand, according to Samuel H. Beer, what the people in the colonial period pursued was only “the freedom under the rein of Great Britain.” Thus, until the end of 1775, only a minority of Americans wanted to be separated from England and to declare independence. It can be inferred that indeed nationalism and commercial interests didn’t prop pilgrims so strongly that they intended to declare independence (Beer,134).

The ideal of liberty and democracy cannot work without a concrete organization or system². Therefore, the concept of “Christian covenants” played an important role in the formation of American identity. According to Daniel J. Elazar, “covenant” is a morally binding agreement signed by a group of equal and independent individuals under the witness of a certain authority (Elazar,6). And since there are seven types of covenants in the Bible, a covenant is a common regulation in the Biblical society. Besides, the people who sign the contract are willing to be treated equally under the witness of a certain authority. It is noted that the covenants created by any gentile society were hardly perpetuated by the hierarchical social system. Thus, Daniel J. Elazar goes on the assumption that a

² The word “federal” is derived from the Latin word “foedus,” which means covenant.

successful covenant cannot exist without the blessing of the Biblical tradition (Elazar,13).

The group organized by covenants is more lasting than that of imperialism. For the members of the former are like family members. Just as the Bible puts it, these members are sons of the covenant. The Jewish people is the so-called sons of covenants. Actually, it is the concept of “covenant” that makes the Jews form a new people. Compared with covenants, the treaties of imperialism are practical and transient, lacking the power of coalition (Elazar,7-8).

In addition, I would like to point out four covenants in the Bible as references to Christian covenants. First, according to Galatians 3: 28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are one in Christ Jesus.” This verse is well inferred that in the Christian covenant the distinction caused by nationality, social positions, and sexuality is eliminated. In other words, the members in the New Covenant are altogether equal. This is why the American people can become a melting pot for the sake of the Christian covenant. Second, the first Christian covenant is recorded in the first chapter of Genesis. Thus goes Genesis 1: 27-28: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” God’s promise became a steadfast covenant to all human beings. Third, Moses led Israelis out of Egypt to the promised land, which was a good land flowing with milk and honey. It was God’s words/promise that made him well-prepared for the challenge. Meanwhile, the covenant drove Israelis to leave the bondage of Egyptians to create a new nation in the promised land. No wonder goes Exodus 3: 7-8: “And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrow; And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land flowing with milk and honey...” Finally, I would like to explain why the covenant makes church members become members of the same family. For they symbolically share the blood of Jesus. In other words, they have the same new identity, members of Christian covenants. The Gospel of Matthew 26: 26-28 says:” And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood for the new

testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.” According to these verses, we can see that it is Jesus’ blood that created the new Christian covenants, making church members become the sons of covenants.

Historically, the American early colonists were the so-called Protestants, who opposed the creed of the Catholic church and traveled to America to establish their new identity. Therefore, they were like the Israelis who were led by Moses to leave Egypt and travel to the promised land. Since the immigrants loved to compare themselves to Jewish people, their thoughts were deeply influenced by the Bible. And indeed their political thoughts and identity formation were integrated with the Biblical concept of “covenant” (Lutz, 102-103).

Since freed from the bondage of the British government, the American colonists were privileged to look for their new lives. And for lack of the safety guard of their mother country, they turned to the Biblical truths to safeguard themselves. Under such circumstances, more than one hundred covenants were signed in the seventeenth century. Until now, these covenant files are still well preserved (Lutz, 114).

Of these compacts/covenants, the well-known “Mayflower Compact”³ can illustrate the identity-seeking history of American people. The pilgrims of the Mayflower ship signed a covenant, which demanded that they should be united to build a civil body. With the help of the body, all of them could face the critical challenge of nature in the new land (Lutz, 19).

Moreover, the “Mayflower Compact” was signed in accordance with the principles of equality and volunteering. It is pointed out that the covenant made the people of different backgrounds, social positions, and beliefs merged into a new people, the American identity. This is like a marriage contract⁴, which is designed to create a new family—a new identity. And it is noted that even servants and maids were required to sign on the compact. Symbolically speaking, every colonist was treated equally in the signing process of the covenant.

In examining the “Mayflower Compact,” we can find that the colonists didn’t present a challenge to the British government. They still showed great respect to the

³ The Mayflower Compact can also be called “Plymouth combination” or “The agreement between the settlers at New Plymouth.”

⁴ After about two hundred years of the signing of the Mayflower Compact, the southern states wanted to withdraw from the federal government, using the volunteering spirit of the compact as an excuse. President Lincoln, however, said that just as the marriage engagement was irrevocable, so the new American identity could not be broken, thus ushering in the American Civil War.

British King. Although they established a new identity, they were in harmony with their mother country. Therefore, Daniel J. Elazar maintains that the new identity didn't violate the existing political order. And he stresses that the society formed by covenants is likely operated on the principle of equality and mutual respect, which is expected to drive the regime to reform itself. Otherwise, the regime cannot continue to keep its power (Elazar, 17-18).

Under the principle of equality and mutual respect, the colonists formed a self-government to handle public affairs. The self-government, however, couldn't coexist with the patriarchal rule of Great Britain forever. Thus, after 150 years of the issuance of the Mayflower Compact, the colonists signed a new covenant to cut their ties with Great Britain. The new covenant is the Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration of Independence is the so-called "the unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America," which was designed to create and define Americans as a new people. As the framer Jefferson put it, the Declaration was aimed to express the American mind. In addition, if compared with other covenants, the Declaration was characterized by its covered region. For there had been no covenant covering as far as thirteen states (Lutz, 113).

With the outset of the Declaration of Independence, the colonists created a new American people. And because of the tradition of American covenants, the colonists used to bind themselves in the agreement. Therefore, no sooner had the agreement was signed than a new nation was created. Besides, in line with the equal and volunteering spirits of traditional covenants, the founding fathers created a new Constitution in 1789 in a tremendously reasonable way. It is proved that the spirit of Christian covenants contributed much to the creating process of a new American Constitution.

In short, because of the Christian background of the early colonists, they used to bind themselves in agreements, which were based on the spirit of equality and volunteering. This led them to establish their new identity with the ideal of liberty and democracy. And historically speaking, the Mayflower Compact and the Declaration of Independence are really two covenants, which separated pilgrims and their descendants from Great Britain, and thus created a new American identity⁵.

Works Cited

⁵ In this study plan, I just make a sketch of the topic "American Identity in the Light of Christian Covenants." I hope that if I can be admitted into the doctoral program I can further elaborate on it.

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