

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

WILBUR ZELINSKY

ABSTRACT. The assemblage of objects that constitute the publicly visible religious landscape of the United States—houses of worship and a variety of church-related enterprises—deviates so markedly from its counterparts in other lands that we can regard its uniqueness as a significant argument for American exceptionalism. The diagnostic features in question include the extraordinary number and variety of churches and denominations, their special physical attributes, the near-random microgeography of churches in urban areas, and, most especially, their nomenclature and the widely distributed signage promoting godliness and religiosity. Such landscape phenomena suggest connections with much-deeper issues concerning the origin and evolution of American society and culture. *Keywords:* American exceptionalism, architecture, churches, landscape, names, religion, signs.

Uniqueness, like sincerity, can be one of the more trivial of virtues. Indeed, every place or event, every person or social entity, any physical object can claim at least a modicum of uniqueness. But what qualifies the American religious landscape for critical scrutiny is the remarkable character and extent of its uniqueness, a constellation of attributes that sets it far apart from the visibly sacred elsewhere in the world. One may argue further that this complex of peculiarities hints at grander issues concerning the origin and evolution of the overarching American cultural system in which they are embedded. However, such ambitious considerations fall beyond the scope of this exploratory essay. Neither do we have here the space or the proper venue for a full-bore assault on the great and controversial general issue of American exceptionalism. But in any extended brief on behalf of such a proposition—and the most persuasive to date may well be Seymour Martin Lipset's—an exceptionally potent argument could be based on the religious evidence, as Lipset has noted (1996, 60–67, 154–157).

To deal with first things first, why should we concern ourselves with the place of the sacred in the visible, tangible, manmade landscape? Simply because, quite apart from its considerable role in the less immediately visible economic, social, and political life of the nation, religion is a major, if seldom dominant, component of that immensely opulent repository of cultural data we call the American landscape.¹ Such intimate involvement in the dynamic fabric of lived-in space is especially rich and complex in urban areas, but the statement holds for the entirety of inhabited territory in the United States and abroad.

AN ASIDE ON THE NONMETROPOLITAN SCENE

If the following discussion focuses almost exclusively on the American metropolitan landscape, it is for two compelling reasons. First, our metropolitan areas con-

* DR. ZELINSKY is a professor emeritus of geography at Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania 16802.