

Thanksgiving observances reflect political agendas

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ATLANTA (RNS)-Ever since John Winthrop proclaimed in 1630 a mission to establish "a shining city on a hill" to inspire the world, America has grappled with notions of a national destiny led by the hand of God.

Now questions of a divine national purpose are playing out in a new setting-the Thanksgiving table. Agenda-driven groups are equipping gatherings nationwide with reflections on the holiday's meaning.

America's
Table is a 20-
page
reflection for
Thanksgiving
prepared by
the American
Jewish
Committee. It
tells the
stories of
eight
contemporary
immigrants
who found
refuge and
opportunity
in America.
(RNS photo
courtesy of
American
Jewish
Committee)

Like the particular snippets of American history invoked in each, these readings vary according to each sponsoring group's answer to the divine destiny question. They differ as to whether Thanksgiving should conjure thoughts of America as God's chosen instrument, or as an affront to all things sacred or as a mixed bag where glories and shames of the past trace to human rather than divine decisions.

To look closely at these reflections is to see distinct worldviews aiming to

define what the holiday—and the nation—is all about. The efforts to define Thanksgiving's deepest meaning, one dining room table at a time, mirror larger—often political—agendas to shape how Americans understand their country as one nation under God.

Thanksgiving “has a series of possibilities that are built into the institution,” said anthropologist Bradd Shore, director of the Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life at Emory University in Atlanta. “It's about America, it has the Pilgrims, it has thanking God, it has turkey.”

Suggested reflections are “an attempt to renegotiate a holiday that was ambiguously religious,” he said, adding that if groups can get enough people to accept their vision of Thanksgiving, “then you've changed the culture.”

That's exactly what Barbara Rainey, an evangelical Christian, says she had in mind when she wrote *Thanksgiving: A Time to Remember*, a 2002 reflection that takes about 45 minutes to read or hear on a newly released compact disc.

Rainey worried that schoolchildren weren't hearing about the faith that inspired Pilgrims to reach the New World, she said, so she begins the book by characterizing Thanksgiving as “both distinctly Christian and exclusively American, a holiday for celebrating faith, family and freedom.”

She goes on to tell how early European settlers nearly starved on their God-given mission to establish a haven for religious freedom, but “sustained by God's grace,” they survived.

“Children growing up in America don't really understand our Christian heritage,” said Rainey, whose husband, Dennis, is president of Family Life, a \$43 million evangelical ministry in Little Rock, Ark. “I just want to see Americans become more grateful for the privileges we have because we may not have them always, and the surest way to lose them is to lose

understanding of where (this freedom) came from and why we have it, and to realize that being a free people is a great gift.”

Other evangelicals share a similar goal. Colorado-based Focus on the Family posts five Thanksgiving-related reflections on its website this month.

On the other hand, the American Jewish Committee and 10 other organizations are offering another type of reflection, on the immigrant history of America, emphasizing human rather than divine agency.

This 20-page reflection, downloadable free of charge from the American Jewish Committee's website, tells the stories of eight contemporary immigrants who found refuge and opportunity in America. It contends preservation of this tradition rests squarely on human shoulders.

“We are the stewards of America,” the text says. “In America, each of us is entitled to a place at the table.”

But it notes those rights haven't always been protected.

“Not every journey was easy,” the text reads. “The first arrivals sometimes shunned those who followed. Not every journey was voluntary. The first African slaves landed in Jamestown a year before the Pilgrims settled in Plymouth. Not every journey was righteous. Native Americans were devastated by a new nation's need to conquer, cultivate and build.”

The American Jewish Committee maintains its reflection is ideal for interfaith gatherings and appropriate for a Thanksgiving celebration that is evolving for many Americans.

In its reflection, United American Indians of New England is even more critical of American history. On Thanksgiving Day, Native Americans from as far away as Hawaii will gather with an estimated 1,000 white

sympathizers in Plymouth, Mass., for the organization's 36th annual National Day of Mourning.

When coverage of the event arrives via television in living rooms, perhaps between football games, organizers hope to get viewers thinking about America's failure to practice moral righteousness from the beginning.

“What we're protesting is the whole mythology of Pilgrims and this whole fantasy that's presented as history,” said Mahtowin Munro, a leader of the Native American group.

It's a fantasy, Munro said, “that the Europeans came over here and the native people somehow welcomed them with open arms and were treated very fairly by the Pilgrims.”

“It doesn't tell a true history of this country. It certainly doesn't tell a true history what happened to us. It certainly doesn't talk about things like genocide,” which she said resulted from battles between European settlers and natives in the 17th century.

Despite a checkered history, others see a nation inextricably tied to God. Among them is Ken Masugi, a senior fellow at the conservative Claremont Institute in Claremont, Calif. In the most recent of his annual written statements on the meaning of Thanksgiving, he argues presidents George Washington and Abraham Lincoln established the tradition to be “a holy day, a day for prayer and recognition of Almighty God's authority over man.”

A nation that remembers its permanent relationship with God will be happier, healthier and less inclined to seek financial benefits from government, he said.

“Thanksgiving is something everyone understands, but we have lost touch with its highest meaning,” Masugi said. “What we are as a nation relies on

a recognition of something transcendent, and that something is religious. ... Without an appreciation of our dependence on the divine, I think we're lost as a people. Trying to find satisfaction purely in the material world is a hopeless chase.”

To straighten the nation's course, he recommends doing what he does at Thanksgiving—reading aloud from Lincoln's proclamation of 1863, which offers thanks for “gracious gifts of the Most High God” and ends by offering “humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience.”

It's as relevant today, he said, as it was then.

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