God's own country
This elegant analysis of how America sees itself - and others - has divided a nation

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Who Are We? America's Great Debate
by Samuel Huntington
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Secure in our ancient heritage, we British have only just begun to think about our national identity. Even now, with immigration and asylum exciting passions out of all proportion to these issues' effects on society, we do little more than worry about alien influences damaging an ethos which we can recognise but have never bothered to
define. So, on this side of the Atlantic, 'America's great debate' on what it means to be American sounds like the self-indulgence of an insecure people. Perhaps it is.

But what the remaining superpower thinks of itself determines how it relates to the rest of the world. That - apart from the intrinsic merits of careful scholarship and elegant style - is what makes Samuel Huntington's Who Are We? essential reading.

Its subjects are the importance that Americans attach to being American, what they think they have in common with other Americans and what distinguishes Americans from the rest of humanity. Religion is becoming an increasingly important part of each equation. 'Muslim hostility encourages Americans to define their identity in religious and cultural terms, just as the Cold War promoted political and creedal definitions of that identity.' Huntington has invented the word 'creedal'. But the noun from which it is derived plays an important part in the analysis of what unites the United States.

The Creed is the legacy of Thomas Jefferson and the founding fathers. It includes liberty under God, human rights (at least for humans within the Creed's culture), the rule of law and representative government. It is irrevocably associated with 'the English language... and the dissenting Protestant values of individualism, the work ethic and the belief that humans have a duty to build a heaven on earth'.

For 200 years, immigrants to America shared (or pretended to share) those ideals. They went to America to become Americans. Now the aspiration has changed. Mexicans 'can easily go back and forth to Mexico and maintain contact with their family and friends there'. Almost 250,000 of them migrated in the 1990s. Not unreasonably, they want to remain Mexican.

The problem of American nationality has been complicated by the moral agonies of the progressive minority. 'Liberal political beliefs fostered (among academics, intellectuals, journalists and others), feelings of guilt towards those whom they saw as victims of exclusion, discrimination and aggression.' Sympathy led to support for diversity. The old patterns of identity were increasingly regarded as symbols of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant supremacy.

The most famous of the old definitions is the 'melting pot' - an 18th-century notion popularised by a play of that name which captivated American audiences during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. The immigrant 'left behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, received new ones from the new mode of life he had embraced,
the new government he obeyed and the new rank he held'. The result was thought to be a unified, though not homogeneous, national identity.

The alternative concept, the 'Anglo-Protestant' model, is - according to Huntingdon's metaphor - tomato soup. 'Celery, croutons, spices, parsley and other ingredients' enrich the mixture. But it remains tomato soup. The society which that image illuminates is a more realistic prospect than the creation of a totally new cultural identity. But it became at least as objectionable to enlightened opinion as the melting-pot. 'A major gap developed between portions of America’s elite and the bulk of the American people over the fundamental issue of what America is and what Americans should be.'

Huntingdon argues that the 'efforts by a nation's leaders to deconstruct the nation they governed were quite possible without precedent in human history'. He qualifies that implied sympathy for uniformity with the explanation that he believes in 'the importance of the Anglo-Protestant culture... not the importance of Anglo-Protestant people'.

That may be a liberal view in the American context. But when the same principle is applied to different societies, difficulties arise. British Muslims increasingly believe that Islam should dictate their secular behaviour as well as their religious beliefs. In a free country they are entitled to live (as well as worship) according to their convictions. That may require no more than the guarantee of basic liberties. But if a nation allows, yet still overtly deplores, their minority position, the only possible result is increasing alienation for men and women who feel social outcasts. Many young British Muslims feel detached from British society.

Much of what Huntingdon writes will strike a chord with those British politicians who invented the idea of incomers swearing oaths of allegiance and learning about the mores of their adopted country. But, in this tight little, right little, island we imposed those obligations for pragmatic reasons. It is easier to live in Britain if you understand the British. The American search for identity is far more metaphysical. And therein lies its danger. If America believes itself to be the 'city on the hill' - Governor Winthrop's noble hope for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts - it will regard much of the world as both morally deficient and in desperate need of being born again in the image of the United States.

Religious extremists, writes Huntingdon, are on the march - Islamic fundamentalists on the east and fundamental Christians in the United States. Asked who was his favourite
political philosopher, President George W. Bush replied: 'Jesus, because he changed my life.' The events of 11 September 2001 changed America into a nation which bought 250,000 Stars and Stripes flags in one day. The nationalism which is a product of fear and the animosity which flows from moral certainty is a dangerous mixture. If you doubt it, read Who Are We?

• Roy Hattersley's The Edwardians is published by Little Brown in October.

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