

Diminished

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [August 16, 2000](#) issue

Our hopes are a measure of our greatness. When they shrink, we ourselves are diminished. The story of American hope over the past two centuries is one of increasing narrowing—or so argues Andrew Delbanco in *The Real American Dream*. The book's three chapters are titled "God," "Nation" and "Self." The Puritans set their hopes on God and God's redemption of humanity from its incurvature upon itself: our tendency, in whatever we do, to be interested only in ourselves. In the 19th century, the American nation replaced God as both our hope's highest object and its surest source. Finally, the two "revolutions" toward the end of the past century—the one in the '60s and the one in the '80s— conspired to "install instant gratification as the hallmark of the good life." By this time the horizon of hope had shrunk to "the scale of self-pampering."

As Delbanco is well aware, the history of American hope is not as neat as his chapter titles suggest. Moreover, the stages he traces have not simply been left behind. There are many people today who do not yet worship at the altar of the self, and who still place their hopes in God or the nation. Yet Delbanco rightly observes that our culture is becoming increasingly obsessed with the self—the consuming, narcissistic self, the self incapable of extending outward in faith, love and hope either toward God or neighbor.

When hope is "narrowed to the vanishing point of the self alone," a dark twin of hope—melancholy—ensues. What is Delbanco's balm for the wound of our melancholy? He hesitates. He wants a new faith to emerge, but is uncertain of its object. Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Richard Rorty notes that Delbanco "is not sure whether the remedy . . . is to get religion, or instead, to resacralize the United States, replacing hope for the divine redemption with the secular hope for an ideally just America."

Rorty shows no such hesitation. Delbanco contrasts the Puritan self "expanded toward (and sometimes overwhelmed by) the vastness of God" and "a national ideal lesser than God but larger and more enduring than any individual citizen." Rorty

responds:

Why . . . should we Americans take God's word for it that he is more vast than the free, just, utopian nation of our dreams? Whitman famously called the United States of America "the greatest poem." He took narratives that featured God to be lesser poems—useful in their day, because suitable for the needs of younger humanity. But now we are more grown up. For us, the tortured adolescent writhings of Augustine, Jonathan Edwards and Graham Greene should be subjects of commiseration, not models for imitation.

Rorty recognizes that "the present culture of instant gratification makes even the Puritans look good by comparison." Yet he wants nothing like their hope. Instead, he assures us that "we have every reason to hope that once today's economic bubble bursts, once we start reinventing the interventionist state, Americans will relearn what Delbanco calls 'the lesson of Lincoln's life . . . that the quest for prosperity is no remedy for melancholy, but that a passion to secure justice by erasing the line that divides those with hope from those without hope can be.'"

"Every reason to hope"? Rorty gives us none. But—leaving aside the question of whether or not his hope for a major cultural change is reasonable—it is not at all clear that even the advent of "the free, just, utopian nation of our dreams" would cure our melancholy. If we had eyes to see beyond the bubble of our own present happiness, would not these eyes cry over injustices perpetrated by and against previous generations, injustices on which our own "free, just, utopian nation" was built? There is no justice for the living without justice for the dead, for without justice for the dead, justice for the living is an unjust justice.

Here is where God must come back into the picture. Only the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" can give justice to the dead (Rom. 4:17). If you want justice, you must want more than justice here and now or there and then; if you want justice, you must want the reign of God. One reason why God is "more vast than the free, just, utopian nation of our dreams" is that without God, such a nation would remain nothing but our self-contradictory and unrealizable dream—the sort of thing conjured up by adolescents who have yet to learn that it is unreasonable to expect the world to adjust itself to their emotional needs.

Early on in his book, Delbanco quotes Alexis Tocqueville:

Men easily attain a certain equality of condition, but they can never attain as much as they desire. It perpetually retires from before them, yet without hiding itself from their sight, and in retiring draws them on. . . . They are near enough to see its charms, but too far off to enjoy them; and before they have fully tasted its delights, they die. That is the reason for the strange melancholy that haunts inhabitants of democratic countries in the midst of abundance.

Desire for worldly goods, argued Tocqueville, *generates* melancholy rather than cures it. Something analogous is true of justice. The more you seek justice, the more you realize that it always remains outside your grasp. Hence figures like Augustine and Edwards believed that if the world is to be enjoyed, it must be enjoyed in God, and if justice is to be realized, it must be granted to us with the gift of God's new world. Without God our hopes and we ourselves will remain diminished.