

# Providence

## The Making of a Religious-political Memory Box

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Using religious *topoi* in political speeches has become a common theme in today's US-politics.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the reference to providence, or the understanding of oneself acting in a providential manner, gives a strong legitimation to whatever the speaker claims to be providential. Through this use in relation to American politics, providence, a religious term originally, has become linked to ideas about American exceptionalism, American statehood and national culture, and manifest destiny.<sup>2</sup>

Today, using the topos of providence evokes certain ideas and emotions of patriotism, nationhood, America and faith as Barack Obama, among others, has shown for example in this speech from September 6, 2012: "We draw strength from our victories, and we learn from our mistakes, but we keep our eyes fixed on that distant horizon, knowing that providence is with us, and that we are surely blessed to be citizens of the greatest nation on earth."<sup>3</sup> The term providence has become a *topos* and can be seen as a memory box of American history.

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1 GUYATT, 2007, pp. 1f.

2 The role of the topos of providence in the *Invention of the United States* is best explored in GUYATT, 2007. This topos also plays a role in the works of MERK, 1963 and BREWER, 2009, who are both concerned with special aspects of American identity and national culture.

3 MURSE, 2012. Even more known for his use of providence in political speeches is George W. Bush, e.g. when legitimising the US-attack on Iraq in 2003, see GUYATT, 2007, p.1.

In this article I am going to explore the ways in which providence can be seen as a memory box and how this may enhance our understanding of political rhetoric. I will argue that especially certain events and experiences in English and American history were seen (and talked about) as providential and thus became part of the memory box of providence. Since the *topos* of providence still plays such an important role today, these century-old meanings are still relevant for politics and for an understanding of this *topos* in political speeches.

Using the approach of the concept of memory box allows me to think of this *topos* anew. It draws attention to the ideas and connotations attached to it, therefore showing the complexity not only of the *topos* itself, but also of every time providence was used in communication. Focusing on the way of how ideas, emotions and connotations became attached to this *topos*, i.e. became the content of the memory box, and which media were used to open the box in certain situations allows for a deeper understanding of the *topos* throughout time and of its role in political rhetoric.

Providence can be understood in different ways: The original meaning refers to God's knowledge of everything in the world, or even to the act of God's hand in the world, e.g. when performing miracles.<sup>4</sup> Usually, it also refers to God's benevolent care for the world's welfare.<sup>5</sup>

The hand of God in the world was a common concept in early modern thought.<sup>6</sup> God was imagined as intervening in worldly affairs in two ways: first as personal providence, concerning only one person or a small group of persons, and second as national providence, concerning the fate of whole nations and determining the role of each nation and its people in the world.<sup>7</sup>

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4 For the understanding of providence in biblical, medieval and early modern thought, see DAVIES, 1992. Davies sees providence in God's command over the physical world (pp. 14f.), in the guidance of individuals (p. 15), and in the ruling of God's will (p. 15). The New Testament also refers to different nations and their different fates after God's will (pp. 16f.). God's power is believed to form the fate of nations (p. 17).

5 See VAN BAAREN. This benevolence does not exclude punishment for sins. Quite a lot of bad things were actually seen as providential punishments; the challenge was then to figure out which sin had been committed.

6 Religion and politics were closely intertwined in the early modern period, the Bible could and was also read as a handbook on how to act, and on social interaction, see also PEČAR, 2011, p. 3.

7 The distinction into personal and national providentialism made by GUYATT, 2007, p. 5 is also used in this article in order to be able to focus more on the relationship between providentialism and political thought.

While personal providence came eventually to be regarded as superstition, national providence is a believed concept until today. In this article, I am going to concentrate on public and political uses of providence, e.g. in prints of political speeches, pamphlets or widely published documents as well as the use of the eye of providence<sup>8</sup> on medals. In these instances, a whole community was witness to the opening of the memory box, and these openings became thus part of the cultural memory of this community. I will first trace the appearance of providence as a memory box in certain events relevant to England's politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth century and then, in a second part, look at the uses of this *topos* in American contexts from the seventeenth until the nineteenth century. What my analysis offers is an understanding of the *topos* of providence as a memory box which helped in the case of the US to form a national identity which is still active today, and in the case of early modern England, form the national identity of a past society.<sup>9</sup>

## **The English case: The role of providence in seventeenth-century English national identity**

Discussing national identity in relation to any region on the British Isles is a difficult task. Approaching this task by concentrating on English national identity at the end of the seventeenth century, i.e. before England and Scotland became one state and at a time, when belief in national providence was strong,

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- 8 The eye of providence, also known as the all-seeing eye of God, is a symbol used to refer to God's all-encompassing knowledge and his ever watchfulness over the world. In the seventeenth century, this symbol became widely used as well as slightly changed: the eye, which was often surrounded by rays of light, now appeared in a triangle which referred to the trinity of God. Especially in England and America was this eye used in relation to rulers and national symbols emphasizing its political meaning, elsewhere in Europe it was more seen as religious symbol, used on altars, pulpits or organs.
- 9 Unfortunately, the very interesting question, if and when, why, the English resp. the British national identity is today no longer closely linked to an understanding of being providential or being the chosen people of God, goes far beyond the scope of this article. It touches, among others, questions of secularisation, political thought, and the English and British development since the eighteenth century.

makes this somewhat more concrete and allows me to leave out the discussions concerning British national identity.<sup>10</sup>

Especially one event at the end of the seventeenth century was interpreted as providential: the Glorious Revolution of 1688/89, when the English Catholic king James II was forced to leave his country, leaving behind his crown for the Protestant William III to take. In the deciding document of this Glorious Revolution, the Bill of Rights of 1689, the English parliament defined what they understood as essential to their identity: the upholding of the Protestant religion as well as of English laws and liberties according to the ancient rights. It was by God's "marvellous providence and merciful goodness to this nation"<sup>11</sup> that the Glorious Revolution was resolved with William and Mary taking the crown of their ancestors. The Glorious Revolution was seen as especially providential,<sup>12</sup> since it occurred exactly a hundred years after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and since the important landing of William of Orange's army at Torbay on the fifth of November<sup>13</sup> was on the anniversary of the discovery of the Gunpowder-Plot in 1605. In 1689, providence was already linked with ideas of the English nation as well as what this nation represented: a Protestant nation with a strong parliament under monarchs given by God. Those ideas can be traced back at least to the defeat of the Spanish Armada, which was often used in comparison with the Glorious Revolution as a sign of Protestant Providence.<sup>14</sup> Since 1588, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, several events were represented as providential and thus filled the memory box of providence. In the following paragraphs, I am going to take a closer look at these events and what exactly made them being interpreted as providential.

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10 James VI and I was the first ruler of both Scotland and England. He tried to establish a British national identity, but failed due to strong existing Scottish and English identities, which were – even worse – based on a strong mutual hostility, confer GALLOWAY, 1986, p. 10. The Welsh national identity, though it existed, was by large ignored in England, while the strong Irish identity found its expression in many revolts. For a discussion on a different aspect of Scottish identity, and how a stone becomes a memory box for Scottish, English, and British identity, confer the article by Jörg Rogge in this volume.

11 BILL OF RIGHTS, 1689.

12 See GUYATT, 2007, p. 70.

13 William could have landed a day earlier, but chose to wait, see GUYATT, 2007, p. 70. He was, after all, a master at propaganda.

14 See especially the article ISRAEL/PARKER, 1991. For the special relationship between Protestantism and providence, confer WALSHAM, 2003, p. 9 and GUYATT, 2007, pp. 14f.

In 1588, when England was under the rule of Queen Elizabeth I who also liked to present herself as “providential queen”<sup>15</sup>, Spain under Philip II launched an attack on the island. This attack was part of the on-going undeclared Anglo-Spanish war between 1585 and 1604 and triggered by the execution of Mary Stuart in England. It was legitimated by the 1588 renewal of a papal bull from 1570, which declared Elizabeth I excommunicated and freed all her subjects from their oath of allegiance to her. The Spanish Armada, said to be the biggest naval force of its time,<sup>16</sup> suffered losses from storms and weather even before reaching the English coast, and more so on their way back. The biggest Armada of its time failed to win against the English navy and was mostly destroyed. Contrary to popular belief, the English navy was not helplessly outnumbered but was able to also win victories against the Spanish ships. Still, the reaction to the defeat of the Spanish Armada largely assigned the victory to the so-called Protestant winds and to providence.<sup>17</sup> Her destruction was even more spectacular because of her prior reputation. The perceived great danger resulted in an equally great relief and astonishment over having overcome this danger. Elizabeth I, a master at forming public opinion, used this victory to her advantage. Not only was she herself presented as a child of providence, also the nation seemed to be blessed by providence, i.e. protected against harm and chosen for a special task.<sup>18</sup> The memory box of providence became filled with memories of this first decisive victory over foreign Catholic forces and was linked to the English Protestant cause.

The development of puritan factions within the Anglican Church since the 1580s further encouraged these beliefs. These Puritans emphasised the ideas of John Calvin and tried to bring them deeper into English faith. Calvin’s theology concerning providence and predestination is fully presented in the 1559 edition of his *Institutes of the Christian religion*. Again, providence is here understood as God’s omniscience and omnipotence of worldly affairs and

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15 DORAN, 1996, pp. 9f.

16 AS ISRAEL/PARKER, 1991 pointed out, the Spanish Armada was indeed somewhat smaller than the Christian force at the Battle of Lepanto, but it was the biggest force to this date in the Northern Seas.

17 For further information on the comparison between the Spanish Armada and the force of William III, see ISRAEL/PARKER, 1991 as well as to the defeat of the Spanish Armada. For the interpretation of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, see also GUYATT, 2007, p. 17.

18 The idea of Elizabeth as providential queen is also explored in HALLER, 1963, especially Chapter 3, who brings attention to the role of Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* in spreading the belief of England as an elected (or: chosen) nation.

his willingness to intervene in the life of individuals and communities according to his will.<sup>19</sup> In addition, Calvin asserts that God uses humans as his agents in executing providence.<sup>20</sup>

The next commonly agreed sign of national providence appeared in 1605,<sup>21</sup> when on the fifth of November the so-called Gunpowder Plot to assassinate King James VI and I, and with him the entire parliament, was discovered. The design of this Catholic plot was known since the end of October, but the discovery of the culprits had to wait until the planned day, which was the opening of Parliament. The search under the House of Lords, still performed at the opening of Parliament today, revealed Guy Fawkes guarding enough gunpowder to blow up the entire Parliament. The deliverance from this danger was, and is, celebrated every year on the fifth of November as an anti-Catholic holiday since then.<sup>22</sup> Again, it was perceived that providence stepped in on the side of English Protestantism to prevent great danger.

Puritans, who were especially prone to search for signs of providence, were largely involved in the English civil war which eventually ended with the victory of the New Model Army over the forces of King Charles I. The New Model Army, which was the parliamentary forces in the beginning while later acting increasingly on their own, was under the command of Oliver Cromwell and composed mostly of Puritans. Their victory over Charles I, who also tried to present himself as a king watched over by providence,<sup>23</sup> seemed to confirm their belief in providence.<sup>24</sup> The deposition and execution of Charles I as well as the abolishment of the monarchy and the House of Lords was seen as providential by this radical religious group as well as by Puritans in New England.<sup>25</sup> They felt justified because of their victory and largely believed that Judgment Day was just around the corner and they were God's instrument in preparing for Christ's arrival on earth.<sup>26</sup> Most Puritans also linked providence

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19 See also DAVIES, 1992, pp. 96f.

20 DAVIES, 1992, p. 101.

21 GUYATT, 2007, p. 17.

22 For further information about the celebration of the fifth of November, confer DOYLE, 2013.

23 Charles I had a medal cast depicting him under the eye of providence: BRIOT, 1633.

24 For the role of biblical beliefs in the English civil war, see especially PEČAR, 2011.

25 See GUYATT, 2007, p. 31.

26 See WORDEN, 1985, p. 55. In this article, Blair Worden shows the relevance of providential rhetoric not only for Oliver Cromwell and his followers, but also for England in general during the civil war. He emphasises that this use of providence

explicitly to England and spoke of their belief of being the chosen people of God.<sup>27</sup>

The delayed Judgment Day in the Commonwealth did not discourage the connection between Protestantism and the belief in being a providential nation. Even though Puritans, now called dissenters<sup>28</sup>, were again pushed to the edge of mainstream religious belief in England, the common belief in their nation's providence as defender of Protestantism did not vanish. The interpretation of the events in the Glorious Revolution shows how deeply rooted these views still were. However, this instance also shows that the topos of providence lost some of its meaning when the political wind changed: after 1660 the regicide of Charles I was no longer considered providential. In fact, it seems as if the entire period of the rule of Charles I and of the Commonwealth was ignored on a whole. The providential character of the events of the Glorious Revolution mostly referred to the Spanish Armada and the Gunpowder-Plot and, for example, was shown by the use of the eye of providence on medals, for instance the medal by Robert Arondeaux, which depicts William and Mary under the watchful eye of providence, triumphing in the Glorious Revolution<sup>29</sup> or the medal by the Dutch medallist Jan Smeltzing, emphasising truth working in accordance with providence.<sup>30</sup>

At the end of the seventeenth century, English national identity was closely entwined with a strong belief in national providence. This meant that in opening this memory box the speakers could expect their audience to link main Protestant victories over Catholicism to the topos of providence, strong anti-

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in politics and everyday-life was firstly very common and secondly not at all meant cynically but in the earnest belief in God and his power in the world.

27 See WORDEN, 1985, pp. 88-90.

28 Since the 1580s, Puritans was the term for English Protestants who wanted to go further in the English reformation than the Elizabethan religious settlement. While Puritans in England tried mostly to reform the Anglican Church from within, American Puritans often left the Anglican Church and formed their own congregations. English Puritanism became highly diverse in the English Civil War and under Oliver Cromwell. Since the Act of Uniformity, 1662, English Puritans were forced to either confirm to the Anglican Church policy or to leave the church. The approximately 2000 clerics who chose to leave the church along with Presbyterian Scots were known as dissenters from that point forward.

29 ARONDEAUX, 1689.

30 SMELTZING, 1688.

Catholic and anti-popery ideas<sup>31</sup>, the idea of being the leading Protestant nation and the idea of having a special national relationship with God.

## **The American case: An English memory box relocates and becomes successful**

The Puritans, who left England for the American colonies in the thousands in the 1620s and 1630s, brought with them their strong belief in providence. Their knowledge of the Bible enabled them to link their experiences in the New World to biblical experiences, e.g. comparing it to the struggles of the people of Israel. Rather than specific events of nationwide importance,<sup>32</sup> they labelled their experiences as providential. Leaving England for America was often due to their belief that this was what providence had them do.<sup>33</sup> Arriving safely in the New World after months on the Atlantic ocean was providential, surviving the first winter was providential, encountering various challenges and overcoming them was providential, and forming a “city upon a hill” (Matt 5:14) was providential, too.<sup>34</sup>

The small communities of English settlers in the vast world of North America stuck together. Especially the puritan communities in Massachusetts, which later spread out over the whole of New England<sup>35</sup>, relied on their strong

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31 Shown also on medals, e.g. BISHOPS STRUCK BY PROVIDENCE, 1723, telling the tale of a conspiracy of bishops to bring the Jacobites to the throne on the obverse and their judgment by God on the reverse.

32 In the seventeenth century, one cannot really speak of the American colonies as forming a nation, or even of having a separate national identity from England, or their home countries.

33 See GUYATT, 2007, pp. 28, 30.

34 An especially contested providentialism can be seen in the belief in providential signs, articulated by John Smith, Leader of Jamestown, that a French ship brought sickness to the native Americans a few years before the arrival of the Mayflower in 1620, resulting in a plague depleting the Indian settlements in Massachusetts: “God hath provided this Country for our Nation, destroying the natives by the plague”, cited after GUYATT, 2007, p. 25. Guyatt points out that also the migration to America was largely seen as providential, as fulfilling God’s plan in America; see GUYATT, 2007, pp. 26f.

35 Today’s region of New England encompasses the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut. In the seventeenth century, New Jersey and New York were sometimes also counted as belonging to New England.

shared belief explained to them by their political leaders, which were usually also their religious leaders. The social structures in Massachusetts resembled theocratic structures. One of the Massachusetts settlers, Roger Williams, whose belief differed from the political and religious leaders and who was therefore banned, founded the city of Providence in today's Rhode Island, again showing the strong belief in God's influence in worldly affairs. The firm belief of the first generation in being the chosen people of God, which showed in providential successes in their ventures, influenced the perspective these communities had about themselves. The tales of the experiences of first generation settlers were told and re-told throughout the seventeenth century. While the second generation, and even more so the third generation, did not experience such intense religious revelations as the first,<sup>36</sup> the stories of the first generation as well as so-called providence tales<sup>37</sup> exemplifying personal providence were nonetheless told and became part of the cultural memory, strengthening the community and their identity.<sup>38</sup> "Judgments against political or religious 'enemies' of New England could be regarded as marks of God's approval and protection of the colony, strengthening the community as well as the authority of the colony's close-knit elite of ministers, like Mather, and governors, like Winthrop."<sup>39</sup>

A special role was given to providence in the American Revolution<sup>40</sup>: not only are the United States in the Declaration of Independence from July 4, 1776 founded "with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence"<sup>41</sup>, but also was the Eye of Providence chosen as part of the new seal representing

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36 Membership in the church was linked to the telling of an experienced revelation and the judgement of church members as witnesses to this tale. In the second generation, church membership declined due to younger people not coming forward to apply for membership.

37 For the genre of providence tales and its relevance for the American literature, confer HARTMAN, 1999. An especially important compendium of providence tales and American history is Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* from 1702, see further GUYATT, 2007, pp. 49f.

38 See SEIDL, 2013, p. 193.

39 IBID.

40 Nicholas Guyatt argues that in the second half of the eighteenth century, the belief in American providence separated itself from the belief in English providence, or more concrete: while in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century American providence was seen as part of the English national providence, it ceased to be so in the later eighteenth century and became a belief in a special American national providence, see GUYATT, 2007, pp. 51f. and chapter 2.

41 The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription, 04.07.1776.

the United States of America. Even though the final design of the seal was not agreed on for six years, engaging three committees and 14 men – among them Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson as members of the first committee – the Eye of Providence was suggested immediately and was one of four features to make it to the final version.<sup>42</sup> One of the men involved, Charles Thomson, explained the meaning of the Eye of Providence in the seal: “The pyramid [where the eye is placed on top] signifies Strength and Duration: The Eye over it & the Motto [Annuet Coeptis – He has favored our undertakings] allude to the many signal interpositions of providence in favour of the American cause.”<sup>43</sup>

The use of the all-seeing eye as part of the Great Seal of the United States refers to two different memory boxes: On one hand, as Charles Thomson explained, this use can be seen as a sign of providence in American history. On the other, the use also refers to the widespread application of this symbol in the late eighteenth century, especially in Freemasonry. The picture itself was already a memory box, full of different meanings and associations. I am of the opinion that, in the case of the Great Seal of the United States, the use of the Eye of Providence on English medals is of a greater relevance than the use in Freemasonry. In England, the eye was already linked to politics and national providence, e.g. in the above mentioned medals of William III and Mary II.

In the nineteenth century, a new layer was added to providence as a memory box during the expansion of the United States of America: The idea of manifest destiny, i.e. having the divine mission<sup>44</sup> to expand the American nation, built on the idea of the “city upon a hill” (Matt 5:14) as well as the idea of being the elected, the providential, nation. While the idea of manifest destiny vanished after its heyday in the nineteenth century,<sup>45</sup> providence – being the more religious form of manifest destiny but also being much more open to different interpretations – once again took its place in political speeches and was also used in religious contexts to comment on politics. The

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42 See U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, BUREAU OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, 2003, pp. 1f. To date, the reverse side of the seal, where the eye of providence is located, has never been cast since it was never necessary to use it as seal. The official design is nonetheless very much in use: on the back of the one-dollar bill as probably the most prominent place.

43 Cited after U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, BUREAU OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, 2003, p. 5.

44 For the idea of mission and the American belief in being “chosen people with a global mission”, confer BREWER, 2009, p. 9.

45 MERK, 1963, pp. 265f.

idea of having a special national relationship with God was e.g. expressed in sermons such as that of Reverend Isaac N. Shannon on the occasion of the 76<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the American Independence on Fourth of July, 1852:

What God has already wrought in this land is the pledge of still greater things to come. He has planted and prospered this nation for important purposes, and those purposes may be learned, in part, from our past history and present condition. It becomes us then not only to acknowledge His providential care in general, but to study the peculiar dispensations of His providence, with a view to determine our present duty, and our future destiny among the nations of the earth.<sup>46</sup>

What Reverend Shannon did not elaborate on was the controversially discussed question of his time of who was part of America's providence. Were Indians and black people part of it? Did America's national providence demand that they could – and maybe even should – become citizens? The experiences of multiple races also became attached to the memory box of providence.<sup>47</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, providence as a memory box evoked cultural memories of experiences of settlement, hardships in a hostile environment, being role models for a pious life, being independent, dealing with multiple races and establishing a new state.

## Conclusion

From labelling Elizabeth I as providential queen, as John Foxe has done, to legitimising America's invasion in Iraq in 2003<sup>48</sup> with the extraordinary role providence has given to the United States, the *topos* of providence was used to evoke religious feelings in politics and was seen as part of national identity. Providence became a memory box which transported attached ideas, emotions and connotations from the British Isles to North America as well as from the sixteenth and seventeenth century up until the present day. Providence as a

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46 SHANNON, 1852, p. 3.

47 See for further discussion on this topic GUYATT, 2007, especially chapter 5 and 6.

48 At least that was what George W. Bush in his State of the Union address claimed, see IBID., p. 1.

memory box, with the meaning of Protestant victory over Catholicism, the belief in being the chosen people of God and being chosen to lead the Protestant nations, was part of English national identity at the end of the seventeenth century. This belief drew from the cultural memory of selected events such as the defeat of the Spanish Armada or the discovery of the Gunpowder-plot and was reinforced in the interpretation of the so-called Glorious Revolution.

When the *topos* of providence was brought along with English Puritans settling in the American colonies, they attached new meanings to this memory box. Instead of events of national importance, shared experiences were added as new layers. The experiences of settlement, of struggling against a hostile environment, of independence, of piety and of being a role model for others became part of providence as a memory box and part of the American national identity. The media using this memory box predominately consisted of sermons instead of political pamphlets and medals, as was the case in England. In both instances the belief in providence included the belief in a providential role of the nation, be it England or America.

As this article has shown, the *topos* of providence can be understood as a memory box. Seeing the *topos* this way, allows identifying layers of meaning in today's use of providence. Not every recipient will immediately link these different meanings to the concept, but it will probably trigger some connotations of national identity and of belonging to the chosen people of God (or, for self-assigned non-Americans or non-English of not belonging to this chosen people). Looking at this *topos* through the lenses of the concept of memory box brought into focus the ideas, but also especially the emotions and connotations attached to the *topos* rather than mere intellectual meanings. Understanding a memory box as one identifiable manmade cultural artefact (in this case an abstract *topos*) and understanding this *topos* as a vessel (box) of (cultural) memories has brought forward the connection between the *topos* of providence and its role in national identity, made possible by transforming a *topos* in a portable container of different ideas, emotions and connotations.

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