

Review - Religion and American Exceptionalism

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Religion and American Exceptionalism

Edited by Dennis R. Hoover

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Religion and American Exceptionalism is an edited volume which collects a set of insightful articles from a special issue published by *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* (Summer 2012). In these articles, scholars and academic pundits discuss and elaborate on the concept of American exceptionalism – that is, a story about *the American way of life* and a narrative which illustrates *who Americans are* and *where Americans come from*. In this book, in addition to tracing the history and discursive origins of American exceptionalism, the authors also illustrate how this exceptional worldview has affected contemporary U.S. politics and the practices of American foreign policy.

The exceptionalist rhetoric of the United States as a ‘city upon a hill,’ according to Noll (ch. 2), can be traced to John Winthrop’s speech in 1630, ‘A Model of Christian Charity’, in which the first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony called for a Puritan vision of the world to be established in the new continent. Hoover (ch. 1) indicates that Alexis de Tocqueville’s two-volume *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) is broadly cited when referring to the particular idea of American exceptionalism. Tocqueville’s interpretation of the United States as an ‘exception’ which

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distinguished itself from other European countries (also understood as the Old World) is arguably the best known of all the 'foreign traveller' works about the American way of life. However, in contrast to the orthodox understanding of Winthrop's exceptional legacy, Seiple (ch. 3) argues that Roger Williams' colony of Rhode Island actually best exemplified the essence of American exceptionalism as evidenced by every citizen's liberty of conscience, given by God and protected and promoted by the state. Over the course of 27 years (from 1636 to 1663), Roger Williams established America's enduring exceptionalism from the 'bottom-up' (grassroots) to socialise the idea of religious freedom among citizens, and from the 'top-down' (government) to institutionalise that idea in the law (Ibid.: 13). Seiple argues that religious freedom

"is integral to an American experience that does not merely tolerate and assimilate different religious identities. It celebrates and integrates them while maintaining the essence of their identity and encouraging all to exercise that identity peaceably in the public square" (p. 16)

Seiple emphasises and asserts that religious freedom is particularly important when discussing the concept of American exceptionalism. In the United States, religious freedom should not be a bipartisan issue; rather, it should be a nonpartisan issue because pursuing such liberty is a permanent U.S. national interest.

Although exceptionalism is an old idea that has had different meanings for Americans in different historical periods, it continues to affect both contemporary U.S. politics and foreign policy practices. Such effects are evident, for example, in the promotion of freedom and democracy throughout the world, particularly in the Middle East and in recent counterterrorism initiatives implemented by the George W. Bush and Obama administrations (Vlahos, ch. 9; Guth, ch. 10). Steven Walt (2011: 4; also see Guth, ch. 10) indicates that while the ideology of American exceptionalism is truly complex, the central element has always been *foreign policy exceptionalism*. The exceptional ideal of reforming and transforming the world as American policymakers see fit was frequently mentioned in the political rhetoric of Washington's elites; furthermore, this ideal has been explicitly articulated in official documents and policy practices. For example, President Reagan's vision of the United States as a 'shining city on a hill', referring to the nation's unique role in the global campaign against the so-called 'evil empire', is well known. President Clinton and his Secretary of State Madeleine Albright also frequently described the nation as an 'indispensable nation'. When talking about U.S. post-Cold War strategy, Albright (1998) once famously said that 'if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future'. Similarly, the exceptional rhetoric was employed by President George W. Bush in his response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, 2001, and served to rationalise the War on Terror proposed by his administration. President Bush (2001) clearly stated that the United States is a 'great nation, a freedom-loving nation, a compassionate nation, a nation that understands the value of the life, and rout terrorism out where it exists'. By utilising such specific language, the American national identity has been discursively constructed. And, perhaps more importantly, the policies implemented by a series of U.S. administrations were justified and legitimised.

Vlahos (ch. 9) argues that the rhetoric of exceptionalism which has been utilised to legitimise and institutionalise American militarism and the counterterrorism policy adopted by several U.S. administrations (particularly the extensive use of drone strikes) is in many ways a betrayal of the traditional faith of exceptionalism. It is a betrayal which has led to tragic consequences for the wider world, especially among Muslim societies. In addition, he argues that in the past decade, a 'radically new and troubling brand of exceptionalism' has been framed and constituted by the Bush and Obama administrations' counterterrorism practices. With the continuation of the 'war' on terror, 'terrorism' is comprehended and identified as an existential threat to America's civil and religious identity. As Vlahos argues, for many Americans today, 'terrorism' is about much more than the rational calculation of threats; in some forms of American civil-religious thought, terrorism per se is the Devil himself.

Moreover, exceptionalism has recently become a rhetorical weapon wielded by conservatives and Republican candidates in the political arena. Based on a survey conducted by Gallup, Silk (ch. 5) indicates that over nine out of ten Republicans (and seven out of ten Democrats) agree that due to America's history and the American Constitution, 'the U.S. has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world'. To comprehend how the exceptional ideal shaped the worldviews of the U.S. elites, Barlow (ch. 7) and Silk (ch. 5) particularly note and examine the rhetoric given by presidential candidates. In 2012, presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Newt

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Gingrich both employed American exceptionalism as the central theme for their presidential campaigns. Both strongly criticised President Obama's perceived lack of belief in American exceptionalism in response to Obama saying that, 'I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism' (Ibid.: 35). Romney argued that 'we have a president now who thinks America is just another nation', and that 'President Obama seems to think that we're going to have a global century, an Asian century' (Barlow, ch. 7). The debate among presidential candidates reveals that exceptionalism largely affects the American way of life. And as former Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee claims, 'To deny American exceptionalism is in essence to deny the heart and soul of this nation' (Silk, ch. 5: 35).

In order to fully understand the meaning of American exceptionalism and how this ideal affects the manner in which the United States engages with the world, Gorski and McMillan (ch. 6) identify the following two different variants of American exceptionalism: the crusader exceptionalism (CE) embraced by Obama's GOP rivals and the prophetic exceptionalism (PE) articulated by Obama himself. The former defines the United States as a blessed nation and seeks to export democratic capitalism to the rest of the world; it considers personal freedom and national sovereignty as important national issues. The latter interprets the United States in terms of the fundamental values and political ideals that the country firmly believes in; thus, social equality and civic inclusion are particularly important in the context of PE. However, as they argue, both CE and PE are rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition – more millennial and apocalyptic in the case of CE, and more prophetic and ethical in the case of PE. Despite Romney's and Gingrich's arguments otherwise, President Obama can therefore be categorised as an American exceptionalist. Furthermore, many of the Bush administration's policies have been adopted and continued under the Obama administration, including, for example, using the just war theory to legitimise the administration's policies and emphasising the necessity of pre-emptive action and preventive attacks.

Overall, the various authors in this book provide insightful explanations of American exceptionalism which contribute to the knowledge of this subject. What makes this book worth reading is that it provides a critical lens through which readers can examine contemporary U.S. foreign policy and rethink how individuals' beliefs, ideas and worldviews shape foreign and security policies as well as the definition of national interests. However, notably, the authorship omits to further illustrate the national myths of the United States—that is, the myths of the chosen nation, the nature's nation, the Christian nation, the millennial nation, and the innocent Nation (Hughes, 2003). These myths, as Hughes argues, are all rooted in Americans' unique religious understanding of reality. Thus, to fully understand American exceptionalism and how Americans view the world, the national myths of the United States are worthy of discussion, both historically and culturally.

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