

Revisiting American Exceptionalism

A recent survey by the Public Religion Research Institute finds that 62% of all Americans believe the United States has a divinely ordained place in history. Most of that 62%, I suspect, do not believe other countries likewise have a divinely ordained role in history. That is to say, they believe that the role of the United States is unique and exceptional.

This idea goes back in American history to the thought of early settlers like John Winthrop, who understood themselves to be engaged in an errand into the wilderness, a new Exodus into a promised land that would be the New Israel. Drawing on imagery from the Christian Old Testament/Hebrew Bible and from Jesus' teaching in the Gospels, they came to view the emerging nation as a light to the nations, a city set on a hill, a shining example of divine Manifest Destiny for all peoples.

But something has gotten lost in the contemporary assertion of American exceptionalism. The original "chosen people" were the Hebrews who came to be known as Israel. But the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible is quite clear that this people was not chosen because they were exceptional. As specified in Deuteronomy (chs. 7, 9), it was not because the people of Israel were in any way superior to other peoples that God chose them. Moreover, being thus chosen meant not just being endowed with special blessing but being encumbered with special responsibilities. It was a great burden as well as a presumed joy. Divine judgment would fall especially harshly upon a chosen people who failed to live up to their responsibilities.

Most Americans have accepted the mantle of divine ordination, but have often spurned the responsibilities and repudiated the judgments that accompany such chosen-ness.

Does God select particular people for a special role in human history? And if so, are we the contemporary expression of that people? The answers are not obvious to me.

What is obvious is that we have no grounds whatsoever for claiming special virtue or qualitative superiority of any kind in the world of nations. American exceptionalism, as currently celebrated, is an appalling and idolatrous form of national pride. If we have been chosen for a special role in human history, it is certainly not because we are better, more righteous, or more faithful than other peoples. Call it luck, call it grace, but don't call it anything of our deserving!

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