

Taking on the Myth of American Exceptionalism

As a parish minister I often felt the Gospel that I was called to proclaim was likely to get me into trouble. Sometimes it felt incumbent on me to provide a theological interpretation strikingly different from conventional doctrinal teaching. Other times I knew the message would not sit well with persons holding certain economic or political views. Let's face it, Jesus was not a capitalist. If there is any economic system that follows from his teaching, it would be some form – probably decentralized – of “Christian socialism.”

This is not to say that Christianity should have a benign view of the State! Perhaps the most difficult issue of all to take on in most American congregations is precisely that of excessive allegiance to the State. Most American Christians are Americans first, Christians a distant second.

In early Christianity the most dangerous form of idolatry was Emperor-worship, an ancient form of devotion to the State. Today nationalism is the common form of this idolatry. In these United States, this nationalism is pervasive and insidious. Most Americans, wittingly or not, are in thrall to the myth of American exceptionalism – the view that, with a God-given manifest destiny, we are superior to all other nations in most every way that counts.

Consequently, we are incapable of certain evils that afflict other nations. And the rules do not apply to us as they do to other nations. One glaring example: torture. A new Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey actually finds that regular church-goers are more likely to approve of torture than others, and a majority of those who attend worship at least weekly say that using torture on suspected terrorists is “often” or “sometimes” justified. So, many Americans may not deny that we torture, but many think it's OK when we do, even though we've never thought it was OK when others did it to us. And even if it's not OK when we do it, no need to hold accountable those who authorized or did it. Never mind that after World War II we actually executed Japanese convicted of torture, including water torture (waterboarding).

American exceptionalism is an affliction whereby we apply harsher standards of judgment to others than to ourselves, because we are presumably morally as well as economically and politically superior. It is a grossly hypocritical double standard. Rooted in a mythic idealization of our nation-state, it is idolatrous.

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