

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM: A THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION  
OF A TROUBLESOME NOTION – SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: American Exceptionalism: A Theological Evaluation of a Troublesome Notion
- Convener: Thomas Massaro, S.J., Fordham University
- Moderator: Timothy Perron, S.J., Fordham University
- Speakers: Thomas Massaro, S.J., Fordham University  
SimonMary Asele Ahiokhai, University of Portland  
David DeCosse, Santa Clara University

Thomas Massaro presented a historical analysis of the notion of American Exceptionalism—a loose (indeed, maddeningly imprecise) bundle of concepts that dates back to a 1630 sermon by John Winthrop. That Puritan pastor and eventual governor of the fledgling Massachusetts Bay colony portrayed his community as “a city set upon a hill,” aspiring to fulfill a mandate of Jesus in Matthew 5:14 to serve as a light to the world. The notion of a distinctive status and special (even divine) mission belonging to what would become the United States inspired subsequent activities of many sorts. Massaro critiqued the triumphalistic versions (such as the self-aggrandizing and murderous Manifest Destiny school of thought) and the demonstrably false claims (such as the notion of easy upward social and economic mobility portrayed by the phrase “the American Dream”) associated with American Exceptionalism that have echoed down throughout U.S. history.

Yet, in line with the oft-heard claim that the inherited cultural myth of American Exceptionalism is a double-edged sword, carrying great peril as well as great promise, Massaro expressed a desire to salvage the positive aspects of this plank of the national creed and its civil religion. The Marshall Plan after World War II and the many humanitarian programs launched by the Kennedy administration to extend a hand of friendship to global partners reflect the constructive possibilities of American Exceptionalism, especially when it is purified of all arrogance and hubris, in favor of modesty and self-restraint. A theological evaluation of this phenomenon benefits from many of the resources of Catholic social thought. These include the calls to pursue a universal benevolence found in social encyclicals from *Pacem in Terris* to *Populorum Progressio* to *Fratelli Tutti*, including appeals for a cosmopolitan spirit of social concern to guide international politics.

Massaro called attention to the chastening assessments of the possibilities and limitations of a supposed divine national mission to promote liberty and democracy found in Reinhold Niebuhr (the Protestant “father of Christian realism”) and John Courtney Murray (with his commitment to broad social dialogue in a situation of irreducible pluralism), but noted that neither of these towering twentieth-century architects of public theology despaired of projects that would reflect the best of American Exceptionalism and its attendant moral standards for national behavior. For his part, Jacques Maritain expressed a marked confidence in the ability of America (his beloved adopted homeland) to serve the wider human community, thus echoing many of the tenets of American Exceptionalism (even while avoiding the precise phrase in favor of careful circumlocutions). While acknowledging the considerable tension that

perdures between the oft-exaggerated claims of specialness affirmed by the most exuberantly patriotic proponents and the Christian affirmation of human equality captured in the conference theme of “one baptism,” Massaro nevertheless proposed a continuing constructive potential for American Exceptionalism.

The first respondent, SimonMary Aihokhai, foregrounded two critiques of Massaro’s presentation but also concluded that thinking of one’s own country as exceptional is not an inherently unfortunate (nor rare) outlook. The first critique was that nation-states are deeply committed to their own interests, and for the United States, this very much includes the perpetuation of its own global hegemony. Further, it is necessary for powerful countries in particular to acknowledge their own capacity for evil before reaching out a helping hand to others. The second critique highlighted how the notion of universal concern for others needs to be more critically assessed. This project should rely upon grassroots solutions, abandoning a “scarcity mindset,” and moving away from a view of American Exceptionalism that denies the agency of other nations. However, Aihokhai concluded that it is still acceptable to see one’s own country as exceptional as long as other countries are not imagined as mere pawns. Ultimately, American Exceptionalism should be viewed as a polyphonic ideal that is carried out in concert with the voices of other nations.

The second respondent, David DeCosse, first noted the virtues of Massaro’s paper, including its appeal to “our better nature,” its employment of Catholic Social Teaching principles, and the recounting of the historical interventions of multiple American theologians. DeCosse pointed out that some of the more recent renditions of American Exceptionalism inaccurately reconstruct ideas from the past. For example, John Winthrop (the seventeenth-century Puritan who imagined America as a “city on a hill”), did not advocate American freedom as we often hear in today’s political discourse, but rather the practice of loving others with a pure heart. Further, he proclaimed that we are all accountable to God. This is a far cry from the individualistic notions of freedom that are often trumpeted today. DeCosse concluded by making certain suggestions to remedy harmful versions of American Exceptionalism. For instance, he proposes embedding Catholic social ethics more deeply in the social imaginary of our present culture and highlighting the role of empathy deeply imbued throughout Catholic spirituality. The ensuing conversation prompted by questions from many members of the audience was both rich and enlightening.

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