

## Exceptional!

There is an idea, going back as far as the American Revolution, that America is “exceptional” among the nations of the world. Roughly speaking, it is defined as follows: It is the idea that America is a more nearly exceptional nation than are others, that it differs qualitatively from the rest of the world and has a unique role to play in world history.

Some point to certain specific areas of functioning which mark out this exceptionalism: It is a nation based on liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, republicanism, democracy, and laissez-faire economics. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_exceptionalism#The\\_Americanist\\_heresy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_exceptionalism#The_Americanist_heresy))

I love my country and I can certainly admit that, perhaps, it is an “exception” to the rule of how nations came into being, (quite different than Europe, Asia and Africa). In life there are always “exceptions to the rule.” And, in fact, I grew up with a sense that we were a country which cared about freedom, human rights and justice, (Good ideals, to be sure!).

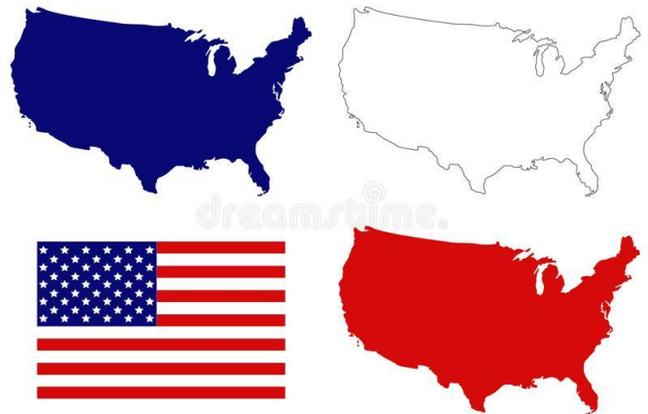
However, from the stand point of faith, I think that one should exercise abundant caution around claims of “exceptionalism”. It worries me, for one, that we might exclude or exempt ourselves from the human condition. We might be tempted to think that atrocious things that have happened in other countries could not possibly happen here. That sort of thinking ascribes to a human system a sort of divine infallibility.

And, what about those elements which have been identified that make the nation “exceptional?” Liberty, in the first instance, referred to freedom from tyrannical government, such as that imposed by the English Monarchy over the colonies. But when liberty gets mixed in with a more radical individualism we might want to be concerned that it isn’t a freedom at the expense of the Common Good.

Egalitarianism –equality--- is, of course, a very good thing. We all would like to see a more equal and just society when it comes to economics and social standing, among other things. But, when equality comes to obliterate valid differences, does it not become a distortion of reality. Equality

between male and female is ever so important: But male and female are not exactly the same. They share an equal human dignity, and they should be paid equally for equal work done. But, their differences are found in a complementarity which makes of them “suitable helpmates.” Sexual difference doesn’t just serve procreation, but there is a depth to masculinity and femininity which serves the well being of the family and society in incalculable ways.

And, of course, in the Church’s critique of Marxism, she denounces the loss of the individual into the collectivity: It is an affront to the human person and human dignity to be reduced to a cog in the machine. However, the opposite of this is that toxic combination of radicalized freedom joined to radical individualism, which seems to make the individual and his/her freedom the absolute, unassailable value. Sometimes, in our culture, it seems that this is so to the point that the individual person seems to have declared that their “particularity” does not emerge from the universal human nature; that they are, indeed, “other.” [Take, for example, the new option coming for Massachusetts Drivers Licenses wherein one may designate oneself male, female or gender X.]



The celebration of Independence Day does give us cause for celebration in having such a great nation in which to live our human values. But, at the same time, a good dose of humility always seems to me to be the way of wisdom. We share one-and-the-same human nature as every other culture of human beings on the planet, and so we are subject to the same weaknesses. Do we really want to regard a man made system---even the best of the best---to be an adequate bulwark against the Devil, who is “prowling like a lion, looking for someone to devour?” (1 Peter 5:8)