

SOCIAL MYTHS



MYTHS OF  
AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

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# Myths of American Exceptionalism

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## Introduction

**I**n 2013 Russian President Vladimir Putin wrote a New York Times Op-Ed reprimanding then U.S. President Barack Obama for “encourag[ing the American] people to see themselves as exceptional” – a practice Putin called “extremely dangerous” (Putin 2013). This response was prompted by President Obama’s reference to the social myth commonly called American Exceptionalism to justify the use of military force in Syria (Obama 2013). The myth of American Exceptionalism posits that the United States is qualitatively distinct and even superior to other nations. Scholarship on this myth is important for many reasons (Gilmore and Rowling 2017: 138; Gilmore, Sheets and Rowling 2016: 506; Gilmore 2015: 303) including its prevalence in international discourse (Gilmore 2014 and Gilmore and Rowling 2018). However, current research on the notion of American Exceptionalism has been put forward largely from the social sciences and not from philosophy (cf. Askland 2013 and Sudakov 2015). As a result, a large body of research has been amassed assessing the socio-historical attributes of the notion of American Exceptionalism while little attention has been paid to the fundamental structure of this social myth. In this paper I analyze the notion of American Exceptionalism philosophically and argue

that what scholars typically refer to as a single myth of American Exceptionalism is more accurately understood as a metamythic construct with four logically independent exceptionalism myths constituting it. I will refer to these constituting myths as American Spiritual Exceptionalism, American Performative Exceptionalism, American Moral Exceptionalism, and American Moral Exemplarism.

This paper contributes to American Exceptionalism scholarship in at least three ways. First, this paper enriches the definitional content of research on American Exceptionalism. While scholars have functional and consistent definitions of the notion of American Exceptionalism, said definitions are broad and vague. In this paper I present five concise definitions to encompass the richness of the notion of American Exceptionalism. Second, this paper clarifies and, indeed, deepens much of the conflictual conversation surrounding the terminology of “American Exceptionalism”. While political elites often contest the notion of American Exceptionalism, they are seldom assuming the same kind of exceptionalism. Finally, this paper gives scholars further clarity on what will become of the myth of American Exceptionalism in the future. In particular, it will be shown that religious belief is not necessary for belief in all forms of American Exceptionalism. As such, though the American polity is arguably becoming increasingly secular it is not necessarily coming closer to losing belief in American Exceptionalism.

## I

### **Review of American Exceptionalism**

Jason Gilmore and Charles Rowling define American Exceptionalism as the “belief that the United States is a singular, superior, and even God-favored country in the international community.” (Gilmore and Rowling 2017, 139). In this section I

discuss rhetorical examples of the United States being posited as favored by God as well as examples in which the United States has been posited as singular or superior in terms of their performance or morality. I further show that while some exceptionalism rhetoric posits the moral superiority of the United States over other nations, there is also a long-standing tradition of viewing America not as merely being morally superior to the rest of the world, but as having an *obligation* to be morally superior to the rest of the world.

The earliest forms of the myth of American Exceptionalism were religiously based. Historian Mark Noll states that “New England preachers had long stressed the special relationship between God and that region” (Noll 1992, 119) by the time notions of a revolution against Great Britain began to surface in the Americas. In a mythic tale echoing the Israelite exodus from Egypt, Americans were viewed as “an especially chosen people” (Diaz-Bosch and Franch 2017, 2), set apart by God with a “specific world mission to spread democracy and liberty” (Blume and Johnson 2013, 2128). This religious aspect of the myth continues to be evoked in political rhetoric today, though perhaps the most eloquent spokesman in recent memory for America’s exceptional spiritual quality was President Ronald Reagan. In one rich example of this, Reagan stated that “[s]ince her beginning America has held fast to this hope of divine providence, this vision of “man with God” (Reagan 1980). He went on to say that,

Our people always have held fast to this belief, this vision, since our first days as a nation. I know I have told before of the moment in 1630 when the tiny ship *Arabella* bearing settlers to the New World lay off the Massachusetts coast. To the little bank of settlers gathered on the deck John Winthrop said: “we shall be a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause him to

withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world. (*ibid.*)

In his 1981 national day of prayer declaration, Ronald Reagan stated the following about America:

Our Nation's motto "In God We Trust" – was not chosen lightly. It reflects a basic recognition that there is a divine authority in the universe to which this Nation owes homage. Throughout our history Americans have put their faith in God and no one can doubt that we have been blessed for it. The earliest settlers of this land came in search of religious freedom. Landing on a desolate shoreline, they established a spiritual foundation that has served us ever since (Reagan 1981).

Again, in his 1982 national day of prayer declaration, Ronald Reagan stated that Americans "share a special sense of destiny as a nation dedicated under God to the cause of liberty for all men" (Reagan 1982).

The theological contributions to the notion of American Exceptionalism are considerable (Wilsey 2015; Vandivinit 2014; Litke 2012). However, the myth of American Exceptionalism is more than the notion of the United States as a chosen people, especially used or beloved by God. The myth also contains elements of Americans as especially virtuous and American ideals as superior to the ideals of other nations. For example, President Theodore Roosevelt intimately connected "moral character" with being a genuine American – irrespective of place of birth (Dorsey 2007, 26) and, even today, Ivie and Giner argue that "Americans habitually imagine themselves as a morally elevated people set apart

from the rest of the world” (Ivie and Giner 2009, 361). Presidents George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George H. W. Bush all invoked notions of American moral exceptionalism in times of international humanitarian crises (cf. Motter 2010). President Obama similarly appealed to America’s moral character to garner support for an intervention in Syria – eliciting the condemnatory response from Vladimir Putin discussed above.

Myths of American Moral Exceptionalism have historically been intimately tied with myths about American Spiritual Exceptionalism, as was seen in Reagan’s quote from John Winthrop. This interpretation of John Winthrop is of a man expecting to live as a moral example to the rest of the world: “The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God... we shall be made a story and a byword through the world. (Reagan 1980). Justin Litke discusses at length this aspect of John Winthrop’s view of the mission of the Massachusetts Bay settlers and his findings are elucidating to the discussion of American Exceptionalism. Litke draws out two important distinctions between how the myth of American Exceptionalism has been understood. Arguably the most prominent and most defamatory is *imperialism*. Under this interpretation the United States has a responsibility to bring other nations into proper moral order through direct intervention.

A less aggressive interpretation of American Exceptionalism is America as moral exemplar. Litke argues that it was in the spirit of exemplification to the world that John Winthrop infamously called the settlers of the new world a shining city on a hill. According to Litke, Winthrop believed the work of “the colonists’ [of Massachusetts Bay was]...to set an example that the rest of the world ought to follow” (Litke 2012, 202). There is an unmistakable

note of exceptionalism in Winthrop's rhetoric here<sup>1</sup>: the Massachusetts Bay colonists were on a mission to be a "light to the world...[;] to show the world, in the flesh, the perfect Christian commonwealth" (*ibid.*, 212). But, unlike imperialistic rhetoric, this was a mission fulfilled by example to the rest of the world and not by forceful intervention.

We have thus far seen three ways in which the United States, or the New World which would become the United States, has been viewed as exceptional. One is a spiritual connection to God; another is moral superiority. Third, we have seen the view that the United States ought to be a moral example to the rest of the world; a beacon of virtue that can be seen by others and emulated by them. In addition to these, American Exceptionalism is often the mythical depiction of the United States as an awe-inspiring force within the world's assemblage of governments. This has been posited through the historical uniqueness of the United States (Tyrrell 1991), such as when Hillary Clinton defended the notion of American Exceptionalism by asserting that "[w]e [America] are the longest surviving democracy" (Clinton 2014). Performance myths of this type often tout the exceptional nature of America's governmental structure or Constitution, such as when Franklin D. Roosevelt stated in his first inaugural address that the American "constitutional system has proved itself the most superbly enduring political mechanism the modern world has produced" (Roosevelt 1933). American military power is also commonly invoked in defense of performative exceptionalism (Szpunar 2013).

<sup>1</sup> See Hodgson 2009, Ch. 2, for a critique of using Winthrop to develop notions of American Exceptionalism. In particular, Hodgson notes that "Winthrop was not an American" (*ibid.*, 2). Litke 2012, 204, also acknowledges this point.



Thus, we can see there are four types of American Exceptionalism myths.<sup>2</sup> There are religious-based myths that are premised on the connection of America to God. There are performative- or prowess-based myths that are premised on the abilities or accomplishments of the United States. Finally, there are two types of moral-based myths. Moral-based myths of the first sort are premised on the moral nature of Americans or of the superior quality of American values; they present themselves as descriptive. Alternatively, there are moral-based myths that present themselves as prescriptive: they are myths cloaked in language of how America *ought* to be; they are a forward looking ideal for which Americans ought to strive rather than a present state already or necessarily attained. In the next section I develop definitions for each of these notions, as well as for the overarching notion of American Exceptionalism.

## II

### **A New Definition of American Exceptionalism**

In their work on myths and the Bill of Rights Kirby Goidel, Craig Freeman, and Brian Smentkowski introduce the concept of

<sup>2</sup> I do not argue here that this list is logically exhaustive or representative of every form of American Exceptionalism that has been posited. My reasons for avoiding the former claim is that delving into an exploration of whether there is logical space for other forms of American Exceptionalism would be difficult and impractical as it would ultimately distract from the larger and more important points of this paper. My reasons for avoiding the latter claim is that, as I have not heard nor read every discussion of American Exceptionalism and as I cannot deny the possibility of logical space for other forms of American Exceptionalism, I cannot say with certainty that these are the only forms that have been discussed. These are merely the only forms of American Exceptionalism that I have encountered in political rhetoric and American Exceptionalism scholarship.

a metamyth as an “overarching construct” (Goidel, Freeman, and Smentkowski, 71) constituted by related myths. An example of this for Goidel et al. is the metamyth of America as a Christian nation. They posit that various social myths of the United States are drawn from a more fundamental myth that the United States is a Christian nation. These myths include beliefs that the American founders were particularly devout and used by God as well as aspects of American Exceptionalism myths (*ibid.*, 72).

As I understand Goidel et al., America possesses a *category* of myths that are drawn from the notion that America is a Christian nation. These myths are logically independent from each other but related in that they are all premised on America as a Christian nation. For example, the godly devotion of the American founding fathers is not entailed by, nor does it entail, a belief in America as wholly set apart by God. Yet both constitute a metamyth that America is a Christian nation. In the same way, American Exceptionalism ought to be understood as a metamyth. By this I mean to say that America possesses a category of social myths that assume some kind of exceptionalism about the United States. American Exceptionalism is the overarching construct that joins these myths together, but the individual myths themselves are logically independent of each other. The category of myths which fit within the construct of American Exceptionalism can be classified into four subcategories of myths. Specifically, there are social myths about the exceptional spiritual condition of the United States of America; social myths about the exceptional capabilities or accomplishments of the United States of America – what I see as *performance*-based myths; and social myths about the exceptional moral condition of the United States of America, either as a nation that is morally superior to other nations or as a nation that *ought to be* morally superior to other nations as a means of example and instruction to them. I will make an argument for the logical independence of each of these myths below, but first it will

be helpful to have precise definitions of these concepts. I suggest the following definitions for the category of exceptional myths and each of the subcategories within it:

*American Exceptionalism (AE)*: A metamyth purporting that the United States is comparatively unique in the international community or comparatively superior in the international community or favored by God or a higher power, composed of myths of American Performative Exceptionalism, American Spiritual Exceptionalism, American Moral Exceptionalism, and American Moral Exemplarism.

*American Performative Exceptionalism (APE)*: A facet of the metamyth American Exceptionalism purporting that the United States polity is qualitatively distinct and/or superior to other nations.

*American Spiritual Exceptionalism (ASE)*: A facet of the metamyth of American Exceptionalism purporting that the United States polity is uniquely connected to God or a higher power.

*American Moral Exceptionalism (AME)*: A facet of the metamyth of American Exceptionalism purporting that the American people are superior in their moral attributes or character or have a distinct and superior set of moral values.

*American Moral Exemplarism (AMX)*: A variant of the myth of American Moral Exceptionalism purporting that America ought to be a moral example to the rest of the world.

The distinction between AME and AMX is subtle and should be carefully attended to. AME myths are descriptive. They posit the United States as being morally superior than other nations or having superior values to other nations. Alternatively, AMX myths are prescriptive. AMX myths explicitly or implicitly posit a

“calling” on the United States to be morally superior as a means of example to the rest of the world. Naturally, one will ask whom called America to be a moral exemplar. This is not always made explicit. Perhaps it is God’s calling on America or perhaps it is a self-imposed calling to take the moral high road and, in so doing, lead the world to a better place.

Above I asserted that each facet of the American Exceptionalism metamyth is logically independent from the other forms. By this I mean to say that APE does not entail ASE or AME or AMX; ASE does not entail APE or AME or AMX; AME does not entail APE or ASE or AMX; AMX does not entail APE or ASE or AME. It follows from this that any form of the American Exceptionalism metamyth can be believed to the exclusion of any other form. In other words, it is logically possible to believe, say, AMX without believing APE. This is not to say that one form of the American Exceptionalism metamyth cannot be posited as being *causally related* to another form; it merely means that the concepts themselves are logically independent of each other.

In the next section I will show the practical importance of drawing out these distinctions within the notion of American Exceptionalism and acknowledging their logical independence. But first it is worth considering for a moment why scholars have thus far failed to appreciate this element of American Exceptionalism rhetoric. It may be a result of these myths generally being presented as causally related. For example, ASE myths may be invoked simultaneously with notions of APE, such as when America’s superiority in the world is attributed to God’s help or design (see Gilmore 2014, 304 and Gabriel 1974, 13). Similarly, spiritual exceptionalism claims may be made in connection with moral exceptionalism or exemplarism claims or moral exemplarism claims may be made in connection with performative exceptionalism claims; for example, political elites may argue that

America is or ought to be morally superior to other nations because America is favored by God. Or it may be argued that because of America's superior power, America has an obligation to behave in a morally superior manner to the rest of the world. Nonetheless, these ideas are logically independent and a belief in one form of American Exceptionalism does not necessarily entail a belief in another form of American Exceptionalism.

### III

#### **One Myth or Four: Why it Matters**

These distinctions are important for American Exceptionalism scholarship in two ways. First, they illuminate how Americans are currently interacting with myths of American Exceptionalism. That is to say, the term “American Exceptionalism” encompasses several substantive concepts and miscommunication and confusion concerning the notion is prevalent because of this. Second, these distinctions are helpful in speculating how Americans will interact with myths of American Exceptionalism in the future. Specifically, I make an evidenced-based speculation that belief in American Spiritual Exceptionalism is and will continue to decline and suggest specific research questions that follow from this.

As recently as 2016, the platform put forward by the Republican party, the major conservative party in the United States, opened with “We believe in American Exceptionalism” (Republican National Convention 2016), which it goes on to define as the belief that the “United States of America is unlike any other nation on earth...exceptional because of our historic role — first as refuge, then as defender, and now as exemplar of liberty for the world to see” (*ibid.*) In 2011, Pew Research Center found that half of Republicans were willing to say the United States stands above all

other countries, whereas only one-third of Democrats and Independents believed this (Heimlich 2011). A more recent survey showed similar discrepancies between Republicans and Democrats, though the variance was not as pronounced (Tyson 2014). But there are signs that these affiliations are changing.

The most recent Republican president has distanced himself from the notion of American Exceptionalism, stating that he “didn’t like the term” (Trump 2016) and indicating that the notion of American Exceptionalism is insulting to other nations and descriptively incorrect as “...Germany is eating our [America’s] lunch.” (*ibid.*). During the 2016 presidential campaign, Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton responded to these comments in an address to the American Legion:

Donald Trump has said very clearly that he thinks ‘American Exceptionalism’ is insulting to the rest of the world. In fact, when Vladimir Putin – of all people – criticized American Exceptionalism, my opponent agreed with him, saying, I quote: “If you’re in Russia, you don’t want to hear that America is exceptional.” Well maybe you don’t want to hear it, but that doesn’t mean it is not true. My opponent misses something important. When we say America is exceptional, it doesn’t mean that people from other places don’t feel deep national pride, just like we do. It means that we recognize America’s unique and unparalleled ability to be a force for peace and progress, a champion for freedom and opportunity (Clinton 2016).

This exchange represented a surprising reversal in political party affiliation and belief in American Exceptionalism. Further, other liberally inclined political elites have reacted similarly to Trump’s denouncement of American Exceptionalism. Ronald Klain, former White House advisor to Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, argued recently that the Democratic Party ought to become the party of

American Exceptionalism. In praise of the vision of American Exceptionalism set forward by Barack Obama, Klain writes that:

[I]n one of the least-appreciated intellectual dimensions of his presidency, Obama redefined the exceptionalist idea during his second term and set forth a new vision of exceptionalism based — not on America’s founding or divine designation — but on the extraordinary acts that Americans perform to help others in need, not just in the United States, but throughout the world. (Klain 2017).

Klain here particularly refers to Barack Obama’s use of American Exceptionalism terminology to justify intervening in Syria, stating, “...when, with modest effort and risk, we can stop children from being gassed to death, and thereby make our own children safer over the long run, I believe we should act.” (Obama 2013). President Obama went on to state that “[t]hat’s what makes America different. That’s what makes us exceptional” (*ibid.*) America is unique because we act not only for our own good, but also for the good of others.

However, Klain is misguided in believing this interpretation of American Exceptionalism is original to President Obama. The most recent president besides Barack Obama to invoke this form of American Exceptionalism was his immediate predecessor. On January 1, 2005, only days after Indonesia was devastated by a massive tsunami, President George W. Bush stated, “Americans are a compassionate people” (Bush, 2005) and praised those who “on their own initiative, are raising millions of dollars for relief efforts” (*ibid.*). Bush went on to say that “these Americans... represent the best of our country and offer an example to the world” (*ibid.*).

Though many of these political elites are using the term American Exceptionalism, it can be seen that they are not necessarily assuming the same types of exceptionalism. Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton are discussing America's (un)exceptionalism in terms of performance, though Clinton includes notions of moral exceptionalism. Klain, however, is only touting Barack Obama's version of American Exceptionalism that is based on America's moral character. Furthermore, President Obama is arguably presenting a view of America as moral exemplar. Notably, none of these elites invoked notions of American Spiritual Exceptionalism such as we saw professed by Ronald Reagan.

It can be seen from this that recognizing these distinct forms of American Exceptionalism clarifies current political conversations and disagreements within American society over the notion of American Exceptionalism. Where Donald Trump appears to reject American Exceptionalism due to current economic inferiority, Hillary Clinton defends it due to the interplay of political, military and moral competence. Alternatively, President Obama defends moral exceptionalism not as a fact, but as a goal. This is the first reason understanding these distinctions is important: drawing them out clarifies discussions on the notion of American Exceptionalism.

The second reason understanding these distinctions is important is because of the connection between religiosity and belief in American Exceptionalism. As the American polity becomes less religious (Pew Research Center 2015 and Lipka 2015), it is probable that it will be less inclined to believe myths premised on a divine being or power. But what does this mean for the metamyth of American Exceptionalism? Will the notion of American Exceptionalism rescind into the history of the United States or will it merely shed its earlier religious aspects and continue



a healthy life consisting merely of myths about America's exceptional performance or moral excellence? Ultimately this research will be carried out by social scientists, but such research, though important, cannot be conducted without properly recognizing the nuances within the myth, or metamyth, of American Exceptionalism.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to give a philosophical treatment of the American social myth known as American Exceptionalism. It has been argued that American Exceptionalism is more accurately understood as an overarching construct consisting of four logically independent exceptionalism myths. These constituting myths consist of myths about America's spiritual condition, America's performative condition, and America's moral condition. It has further been argued that properly understanding the nuances within the notion of American Exceptionalism is important for two reasons. First, traditional political party allegiance to American Exceptionalism appears to be shifting. Once nuances within the concept of American Exceptionalism are brought to light, the complexities of these shifts become focused. In particular, one can see that where Republican affirmations of American Exceptionalism are often laden heavily with language of spiritual and performative exceptionalism, Democrat elites taking up the banner of American Exceptionalism are often advocating for what I have called Moral Exemplarism. Second, the oldest aspect of the myth, its spiritual aspect, maybe less plausible to coming generations of Americans. As such, it is important to consider what other aspects of this social myth remain that will be viable to a predominantly secular American polity.

It is my hope that this work will prompt future quantitative research into these myths in two ways. First, quantitative research is needed to determine the extent that Americans hold these exceptionalism beliefs about their country. That is, do the majority of Americans hold Spiritual Exceptionalism beliefs, Performative Exceptionalism beliefs, Moral Exceptionalism beliefs or Moral Exemplarism beliefs? There is some research that has inadvertently assessed these notions quantitatively<sup>3</sup>, but I hope to see more. Second, quantitative research is needed to determine the political correlate of belief in these myths. That is, are any one of these forms of American Exceptionalism held more strongly by political liberals or conservatives? This future quantitative research is, of course, outside the purview of philosophical enquiry and will ultimately be taken up by social scientists. This paper has attempted to analyze the notion of American Exceptionalism philosophically in order to understand the nature of the social myth more accurately. This was a necessary element of properly understanding this long-standing construct within American society but converting this new-found knowledge into a practical understanding of the American people, albeit a social science endeavor and not a philosophical one, is the next step.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, a Lifeway Research survey found that 53% of Americans agree with the statement: “God has a special relationship with the USA.” See Stetzer 2015.

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