

*American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion: Reassessing the History of an Idea*

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*“John Wilsey takes the concept of American exceptionalism – a cultural lightning rod if ever there was one – and helps us to think deeply about it. Both historian and theologian, Wilsey’s larger goal is to help American Christians think historically and Christianly about our national identity. Rather than pushing us either to embrace or reject the view of America as exceptional, he argues persuasively that there are expressions of exceptionalism that the Christian can affirm, as well as aspects that the faithful believer must renounce. His book*

## The “Cultural Lightning Rod” of American Exceptionalism

Is the United States an exceptional nation? Of course it is. The United States was the first nation to be built on the ideas that would come to define the Western world – freedom, democracy and the celebration of individual rights. The United States’ commitment to religious freedom, the exportation of its capitalist economy around the world and its long-lasting experiment in ordered liberty make it unlike any other nation. Though not everyone may like the way the United States has used its exceptional status over the course of the last two centuries, it is hard to deny that it has been, and continues to be, extraordinary.

But if we were to approach this question from a theological rather than a historical perspective, the answer becomes more difficult. Does God have a special plan for the United States of America? Is God always on the side of American democracy or the free market? Is America a “city on a hill”? A new Israel? Many citizens and leaders of the United States have answered yes to all of these questions. But are they correct?

I first began to think deeply about these questions when I started teaching in the history department at Messiah College in fall 2002. Messiah is an embracing evangelical college near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, with roots in Anabaptism, a Christian tradition that has always warned the church about the dangers of aligning too closely with the state. The school does not fly an American flag on campus, a reminder that the kingdom of God is more important than any nation-state – even the USA. Though I do not worship in an Anabaptist congregation, I have come to appreciate the school’s commitment to never letting its allegiance to the United States trump its loyalty to the higher purposes of God’s work among the people of all nations.

I do not know if John Wilsey would feel comfortable working at an institution that does not fly an American flag. As he explains in the introduction to this book, he is an ardent patriot. But if I understand his argument in the pages that follow, I think he would agree with my Anabaptist friends that Christians in the United States commit idolatry when they exalt the nation over the kingdom of God.

I first met John a few years ago at a talk I was giving at the Virginia Book Festival. At the time he was an associate pastor at a Baptist church in Charlottesville and was putting the finishing touches on his excellent *One Nation Under God? An Evangelical Critique of Christian America*. Shortly after that first meeting, John moved to Houston and joined the faculty of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Today he teaches history, theology and apologetics to seminarians and undergraduates as well as to inmates in one of the largest maximum security prisons. I have seen John live out his vocation in a number of settings, from professor and author to husband, father and Baptist preacher. I know that he loves his

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# BOOK EXCERPT

*helps us to discern between the two. Any thinking Christian who aspires to patriotism without idolatry would benefit from reading this fine work."*

— **Robert Tracy McKenzie**,  
professor and chair,  
department of history,  
Wheaton College

country, but I also know that he loves his God more. I can think of few scholars better equipped to offer a nuanced historical and theological understanding of American exceptionalism and its relationship to civil religion.

— *Taken from the foreword by John Fea*



**John D. Wilsey** (PhD, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary) is assistant professor of history and Christian apologetics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He also serves as associate director and senior research fellow for faith and liberty at the Land Center for Cultural Engagement at Southwestern. He is the author of *One Nation Under God: An Evangelical Critique of Christian America*.

## How special is America, really?

*The idea of America's unique place in history has been a guiding light for centuries. With thoughtful insight, John D. Wilsey traces the concept of exceptionalism, including its theological meaning and implications for civil religion. This careful history considers not only the abuses of the idea but how it can also point to constructive civil engagement and human flourishing. In this brief interview he unpacks these concepts a bit further and explains their meaning for the church.*

### **As a professor of history and apologetics, what made you want to write a book about the idea of American exceptionalism?**

**John D. Wilsey:** As a civil religious concept, exceptionalism has historically been articulated in one of two ways: One form of exceptionalism is imperialistic, exclusivist and justified in theological terms. Another is informed by the liberal ideals of natural rights, individual freedom, and human dignity and equality. I call the former closed exceptionalism and the latter open exceptionalism. Open exceptionalism forms the basis for faithful and biblical citizenship.

What I consider unique about this project is that it treats exceptionalism as an aspect of civil religion. Thus, the book is a theological assessment of the concept. The goal of the project is to think through how exceptionalism can be a helpful expression of patriotism for people of any political persuasion.

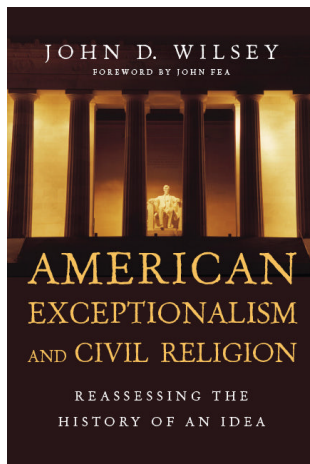
### **How does the history of America come into play in this idea? What problems are you seeking to examine?**

**Wilsey:** This book was largely born out of the tension between love for country and acknowledgement of its failures. Some of those failures occurred long ago. Many of those failures have repercussions that remain unaddressed. And knowing that some of my ancestors were slave-owners reminds me that I have a familial connection to America's "original sin." That is a sobering thought.

My goal was neither to wrap myself in Old Glory nor to offer a screed against America. Rather, I want to consider exceptionalism from historical and theological perspectives and to try to sift the precious from the worthless within this often ambiguous, loaded concept. Perhaps a just model of Christian civic engagement can arise from such a consideration.

### **What does the issue of exceptionalism have to do with our faith as Christians?**

**Wilsey:** As a confessing Christian, how do I live as a citizen of the city of God while sojourning in the city of man? How do I fulfill the spirit of Jeremiah 29:7, to "seek the welfare of the city . . . and pray on its behalf"? Gladly do I embrace America, but I do not—I cannot—do so believing that God chose America as his special people, that he gave America a singular destiny or that America is always right. As a Christian, I seek to live as a faithful



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*"John Wilsey has delivered a provocative and much-needed account of the promise and perils of American exceptionalism. Few other writers possess the combination of historical and theological insight required to produce a book of this kind."*

– **Thomas S. Kidd**, professor of history, Baylor University, author of *George Whitefield*

American citizen. But as a Christian, I recognize that the prophetic word must sometimes be spoken.

The theological commitments associated with American exceptionalism (AE) conflict sharply with important doctrines of the Christian faith, risking the conflation of salvation history with American history and identity. This is problematic for the American church as it seeks to advance the gospel across political and ethnic boundaries. Therefore, as a concept, AE requires refinement. Today's discourse about American identity and purpose needs to be suited to affirm American distinctiveness while not offending the theology of the Christian gospel.

**You write that you love America, yet your critique of the concept of exceptionalism is very pointed. What is your response to that?**

**Wilsey:** This is a book about American exceptionalism as an aspect of civil religion in America. The topic interests me because I am a patriotic American—I love my country and am thankful to God that America is my home. I am also thankful to those who have sacrificed their lives and to those whose loved ones' lives were lost so that I may enjoy the blessings of America. But as a Christian—a member of a multiethnic community of faith that transcends nationality—I affirm that any nation that uses God talk to self-identify must be prepared to accept scrutiny.