

Why G.K. Chesterton Believed America Was 'Exceptional'

In recent years there has been much talk about American exceptionalism. Does it—or does it not—exist? Are we truly a unique people—or are we not?

Well before all this talk, G.K. Chesterton weighed in on the side of the American exceptionalists. The United States, he wrote, was the only nation “with the soul of a church.” What did he mean? Very simply that America was established on the basis of a creed, and the founding document of that creed was the Declaration of Independence. By subscribing to its tenets, anyone can be—or become—an American.

Chief among those tenets is equality, but not equality in the modern sense of that term. In all likelihood Thomas Jefferson was not a traditional Christian, but he did believe in “Nature’s God” in whose eyes all men were created equal.

Modern notions of equality stand Mr. Jefferson on his head. A limited government man, Jefferson did not envision or promote government-mandated equalities. In fact, he presumed that a bigger and bigger government would inevitably mean less and less equality. Today people on the left and the right would probably disagree with him.

This is especially the case with those on the left, whether they be the most moderate of liberals or the most fervent of socialists. A century ago, when G.K. Chesterton was just entering his prime, socialism was still a fairly new and even romantic idea. Today it is old and tired. Wherever it has been in place, it has ended in either failure or tyranny.

What about the western European experiment in what its admirers like to call democratic socialism? Surely, this is an example of at least semi-socialist success. Well, to borrow

from the paradox-minded G. K. Chesterton, sometimes nothing fails like success. Given collapsing birth rates and spiraling costs of government, not to mention the ongoing influx of non-Europeans, the future of western Europe is not exactly rosy.

And yet there has been a resurgence of interest in democratic socialism right here in Thomas Jefferson's America. Witness the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign—and the spark he lit among the young. Here we may well find the latest incarnation of American exceptionalists: socialism may have failed elsewhere, but somehow it can be made to work right here in the nation with the soul of a church.

Chesterton had little to say about the prospects for socialism in America, but he had a good deal to say about the socialist idea and certain of its advocates who were also his contemporaries, specifically George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells. He also freely admitted that he had found socialism attractive—so long as he could believe, wrongly he came to see, that socialism meant protecting the weak. By the same token, there had been a time in his more youthful days when he had thought of himself as an imperialist—so long as he could believe, wrongly he came to see, that imperialism meant protecting England.

As Chesterton grew older, he came to see that socialists and imperialists were not just mistaken, but that they essentially believed in the same thing, namely the power of government, specifically the “concentrated” power of a central government.

To Chesterton, the best, meaning worst, example of such a combination was George Bernard Shaw. In truth, Shaw embodied many ideas that Chesterton could not abide, including not just socialism and imperialism, but Shaw the feminist, Shaw the prohibitionist, Shaw the progressive, Shaw the Puritan, and Shaw the vegetarian. (Chesterton puckishly admitted to having submitted to bouts of vegetarianism—between meals!)

We'll save Chesterton's views on all these "isms" for a later day. What must be dealt with in this installment is the hypocrisy of Shaw the socialist, whose love for humanity did not necessarily extend to individual human beings. Most telling is a debate exchange between Shaw and Chesterton. In response to Chesterton's defense of the English common man, Shaw blurted out that his only feeling for the English common man was to "abolish him and replace him with sensible people."

Chesterton ended that debate—and his life—a staunch supporter of common men everywhere, of the "beer drinking, creed making, fight provoking, ever lovable common man."

Shaw, on the other hand, placed his faith in the Nietzschean Superman. So did H. G. Wells, who anticipated a utopian world state in which everyone will have outgrown original sin. That would also be the same utopian state that Chesterton reader, T. S. Eliot, feared, because in such a state no one would have to be good.

Chesterton, of course, wanted all people to choose to be good. He also presumed that that was the point of religion, not necessarily to do good, but to help people be good. But he never surrendered his belief in either the "fight provoking" common man or in original sin (which he thought was the only Christian doctrine that could actually be proved).

And the Shaw-Wells-Nietzsche Superman?

"The trouble with all modern hero worship and celebration of the Strong Man is this: in order that he may be something more than man, we must be something less," Chesterton said.

To Chesterton, the more attractive hero was the old hero, a hero like Achilles, who was more human than humanity itself. A society that recognized such heroes did not need a Superman. As such, it was already an exceptional society, meaning a society of exceptionally strong common folk, whether or not it might also be a society "with the soul of a church."

In the end, Chesterton was an American exceptionalist in more ways than one. In addition to having the "soul of a church," America was an experiment in what Jefferson called an "empire of liberty." Distrusting as he was of concentrated power (whether in government or big business), Chesterton, the non-socialist, looked favorably on an America that occupied a sprawling territory, but had a weak central government. It's that very experiment that is very much in question today.