

EXCEPTIONALISMS WORLDWIDE: GLOBAL ETHICS AS A RESPONSE

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American exceptionalism is the predominant topic of this book.¹ In this contribution, I place the exceptionalism of one superpower in the context of other exceptionalisms, which exist across the globe and across history, in empires and in small states, religiously motivated or in secular form. At the same time, each concept – I would call it ideology – of exceptionalism has its historical, geographic, economic and religious specificities. The perspective of a global ethics across nations, cultures and religions includes a fundamental critique of exceptionality and offers in re-place-ment the vision that we all are exceptional in our own rights and this uniqueness contributes to the beauty, diversity and unity of humanity and the whole creation. This global ethics perspective with its four ethical responses below is concluded by the religious perspective: we can put exceptionalism in the right place by acknowledging that there is only one truly exceptional entity: the Divine, in China called Heaven.

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4.1 Characteristics of exceptionalism

Exceptionalism is the worldview that a nation, ethnic group, people (Volk), family, religion, individual or society is extraordinary in its qualities and mission in the world. Exceptionalism has existed in many nations throughout history such as the ancient Rome, ancient Greece, ancient India and the Ottoman Empire. In modern times, the worldview of exceptionalism persists but with different intensity – evident in the United States, Australia, France, Germany under Hitler, India, Pakistan, Imperial Japan, Iran, Serbia, Israel, North Korea, South Africa under Apartheid, the imperial Spain, imperial Great Britain, Russia and more.²

Exceptionalism is characterized by an attitude and belief of superiority of one's own nation, group, or religion over all others. It is an expression of nationalism and of imperialism in the case of powerful countries. In religious perspective, the concept of the 'chosen people' as a special mandate and mission from God is prevalent. Exceptionalism is also at the root of racism and apartheid. Historical justifications, often by an origin myth of one's own history, culture and religion, offer the cement for unity.

Exceptionalism can create a strong identity among the people included. In addition, the identity forged through unity is also reached through the exclusion of others, e.g. white supremacy over non-white citizens, the Rus (Russian ethnic group) as the true Russians and the Han as the true Chinese.

As exceptionalism has existed throughout history and continents, it seems exceptionalism as a worldview is not an exceptional and unique perspective! As a result, nations who claim to be exceptional fight other nations who also claim to be exceptional to assert their supremacy. Therefore, exceptionalism is one justification for warfare. Defeating exceptionalism is key for peace.

² For literature for these countries see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exceptionalism#History>.

4.2 American exceptionalisms

American exceptionalism is widespread in the American perception of national identity. At the same time, American exceptionalism is not so exceptional if we look at history and the long list of nations mentioned above. What is specific? I am not specialized in America as other contributors in this collection of articles. However, I have formulated some analysis and observations from the international comparison: American exceptionalism is historically somehow rooted in the American Revolutionary War 1765-1783 in which the American Colonies defeated the British Empire and formed the United States of America, the first modern constitutional liberal democracy. Americans can be proud of this historical contribution to humanity. It influenced the French revolution shortly after in 1789 and many shifts from colonialism and aristocracy to liberal democracy. But is it enough to speak about exceptionalism?

The historic event was cemented by the religious perspective of (white) Americans as the ‘chosen people’. The three Abrahamic religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam all have this notion of being selected and called by God for a special mission in this world. This idea of the ‘chosen people’ often includes an eschatological perspective to save the world until the end of the time. However, the interpretation of ‘chosen people’ is fundamentally different in the three religions, as we will see later in this article.

The title of this subchapter is “American Exceptionalisms” in plural, as various dimensions and justifications can be distinguished. The first dimension is the above-mentioned origin of exceptionality as the first nation with a liberal democracy and thus missioned (until recently) to bring liberalism and democracy to the whole world. Another aspect is the religious exceptionalism, especially among Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, who have a combined world mission to convert and baptize as many humans as possible across the globe. A third American exceptionalism is linked to science and technology, where the USA is seen as the

spearhead of technological innovation. A fourth form of American exceptionalism can be seen in the anti-racism movements, such as the non-violent civil rights movement of Martin Luther King, that aimed to counteract white supremacy and promote multi-racial tolerant societies that respected human rights for all in America and across the globe.

4.3 Other superpowers' exceptionalisms

Many countries throughout history have an imbedded ideology of exceptionalism in their national narrative. France, Great Britain, Spain, Portugal and the Ottoman Empire had it as colonial superpowers and Empires³, and such thinking gave them the self-confidence to conquer the world, and build the best navy, strongest political system, richest cultural heritage and language. Huge contributions to world history (like the French revolution) were made - all through belief of a divine calling or being chosen people. Many of these superpowers have been and are global trading nations and powers.⁴ Exceptionalism is then linked to expansionism: the will to expand and dominate beyond one's own borders.

China continues to see itself as exceptional due to five thousand years of cultural and intellectual heritage and persistence throughout the long chain of its dynasties. Russia, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, re-emphasized its very old historical identity as a Russian-Orthodox united nation. Russia and the Russian-Orthodox Church celebrated in 1988, a thousand years of the church, remembering the baptism of Vladimir I, ruler of the Kiev Rus. In addition, Russia's size is exceptional, as it is the geographically largest country from Central Europe to Japan. Turkey in various form also sees itself with a historical mission in the world, as a

³ See Stükelberger, Christoph: *Globalance. Ethics Handbook for a Balanced World Post-Covid*, Globethics.net, Geneva 2020, 94-102 on Empires.

⁴ Kotkin, Joel, *Stämme der Macht. Der Erfolg weltweiter Clans in Wirtschaft und Politik*, Rowohlt: Reinbek Bei Hamburg, 1996.

leading Islamic country and a bridge between East and West. Iran, with its many thousand-year-old history and centre of both the Shiite part of Islam and a large Persian Empire in the past, also claims an exceptional role in world history. More examples of exceptionalism from world history can be found in the Roman Empire, the Mongol empire, the Byzantine Empire, the Maurya Empire covering India, Pakistan and Afghanistan and more. We can observe that most of the empires – due to their dominance in size, and political, military and technological-economic power – described them-selves as exceptional, although with different meaning.

4.4 Small states' exceptionalisms

However, small states also see themselves as exceptional. The small size of a nation could lead to a minority complex, but another narrative of exceptionalism can develop based on historical, religious, political, racial or innovative grounds. Let us start with my country of origin and residence:

Switzerland is a tiny area in the midst of Europe, which until the 19th century was a developing country with many emigrants due to widespread poverty.⁵ In the 20th century, Switzerland saw itself as exceptional, on top in wealth, innovation, financial systems, peace and more. It turned its small size into an advantage: at the crossroads of North and South, East and West in Europe, a historical myth of Wilhelm Tell, the small 'David' conquering the big empires, the uniqueness of Swiss neutrality, of Swiss quality, Swiss work ethics and extraordinary contribution to humanity such as the Swiss founder of the Red Cross Henri Dunant. It was a narrative of Swiss exceptionalism, a secular form of the 'chosen people'

⁵ *La Suisse, pays en développement*. 1798-1848-1998-2048, Revue Sud 5/1998.

(*ausgewähltes Volk*)⁶, which then became, especially after World War II, more and more an ideology. In 1991, the 700-year celebration of the beginning of Switzerland in 1291, an intense debate arose about the identity and self-understanding of Switzerland and its role as an exceptional country in the world. Since then, under conditions of globalization and a certain isolation in Europe as non-member of the European Union, Switzerland has come back to a more realistic view of having some exceptional characteristics, but is in many aspects a normal country with strengths and weaknesses.

Israel is another example of a small country with the notion of exceptionalism. Again, Israel has an exceptional history as the Jewish people were without a land and nation, suffered an incomparable holocaust and became the scapegoat for many evils such as pandemics throughout centuries. The deeper root of Israeli exceptionalism lies in the religious view of Judaism being the faith of a chosen people. Again, religious narratives like the biblical story of little David (later King David) defeating giant Goliath cemented this view.

What is the ethical response to these manifold national exceptionalisms in a modern globalized and interdependent world? Let me suggest a fourfold answer.

4.5 Ethical response 1: All humans are chosen people

What is the ethical response on the notion of ‘chosen people’⁷? As it is a religious perspective, it has to be defeated by a religious perspective in order to convince believers. Let me answer from the Christian perspective of the New Testament. The notion of the ‘chosen people’ is deeply

⁶ Zweifel, Harry, *Wir sind ein ausgewähltes Volk! Die Schweiz als Vorbild 700jähriger Demokratie und friedvollen Zusammenlebens*, Lantsch-Lenz Biograph, 1999.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chosen_people.

rooted in Judaism and its holy scripture the Torah, the Hebrew Old Testament Bible: God selected the Jewish people and gave them a special vocation and calling, fixed in the Divine, the absolute, to play the specific role individually and as a group, thus an Alliance of God with his people. Exceptionalism was often interpreted as the right to dominate and oppress based on superiority, but Old Testament calling was rather an obligation to be obedient and faithful to the one God in response to the faithfulness and protection of God for the chosen people. This alliance includes the obligation to serve the members of the chosen people and to protect especially the weak, as expressed in many books of the Old Testament such as Dtn 26:1-11. Exceptionalism in the ethical sense, is of exceptionally caring people.

Jesus was born a Jew but then enlarged the vision of the 'chosen people' dramatically: chosen is not a matter of blood, ethnicity, tribes, class or status, but the issue of faith alone: anybody who believes in the Kingdom of God, visible in the servant leadership of this poor Jesus, is chosen and thus belongs to the eschatological global community. The revolutionary shift from Judaism to Christianity is that every individual, without limitation, can be part of the 'chosen', called by God to serve. Everybody can thus become 'exceptional'! It is a fundamental 'democratization' or equalization of exceptionalism. It is expressed in a simple and impressive way in the Christian perspective of community of persons with gifts (charism, charisma in New Testament Greek): "There are different kinds of gifts (charisma), but the same spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now, to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (Bible, 1 Cor 12:4-7). Some have the gift of knowledge, others of wisdom, others of healing or of prophecy (1 Cor 12:8-11). Each believer/follower of the teaching of Jesus is exceptional in his/her own right with her/his specific gifts. Together they build the community of servants and stewards for humanity and for the common

good (Luke 12:45ff). Inclusion instead of exclusion is the result of this vision of ‘exceptional’ individuals! Therefore, Christians cannot be nationalists or racists, as they are ‘people among all people’, answering the call to serve wherever they are, as citizens of the Kingdom of God which has a vision for humanity – not primarily as citizens of a nation that claims to be exceptional. We could call it a new exceptionalism as universalism, or as Paul in the letter to the Corinthians proclaimed: we are one body with many parts and gifts (1 Cor 12).

4.6 Ethical response 2: The beauty of plurality of exceptionalisms

This New Testament does not mean that we have to deny exceptionalism completely, but we have to transform it from an ethical perspective: There is not one exceptional nation, race or ethnic group, but there are manifold exceptional individuals, groups, nations and religions. Like a field of beautiful flowers with high biodiversity where each flower is unique and exceptional, the community of nations, races, ethnic groups, languages, cultures, historic pathways, age groups and religions build a unique bouquet of ‘flowers’, each entity exceptional in its uniqueness. The beauty of the plurality of exceptionalisms leads us to ethical modesty and inclusivity.

4.7 Ethical response 3: Defeating exceptionalism for peace and multilateralism

This new, inclusive understanding of ‘exceptionalism’ defeats the exclusive exceptionalism and replaces it with multilateralism, equality of nations and peaceful cooperation. Exceptionalism in its above-described ideological form distorts and misinterprets historical facts of a nation by denying that each nation has also weaknesses and is in many aspects, average. A realistic self-understanding of a nation is much more sustainable

than this ideological narrative of exceptionalism, which - sooner or later - breaks down and, like all Empires, disappear. Religious and political fundamentalisms⁸ and extremisms share with exceptionalism this ideological foundation of exclusion, arrogance, and physical or mental violence. It denies the value of others, leading to lack of respect and lack of recognition⁹. The ethical answer is to be exceptional not at the expense and on the backs of others, but to be exceptional in service, love, respect, humility and gratitude.

4.8 Ethical response 4: Interpreting the Holy Scriptures with spiritual depth

Exceptionalism as well as religious fundamentalism cannot be defeated with secular or humanistic appeals alone. The alternative 'exceptionalism' as a value-system of global ethics and love for humanity as described above can only be persuasive if the Holy Scriptures of the different religions, which are used as justification for exceptionalism and chosen people ideologies, are carefully interpreted with historical-critical methods that contextualize holy texts with spiritual depth in order to show the deeper meaning. This is the reason why serious theological education of pastors, priests, imams and gurus is not just a private affair of the respective religious communities, but a public affair of a nation. Theological faculties in state universities, as it is still the case in many countries in Europe, but rather rare in the Americas, Africa and Asia, can be justified and is absolutely in line with a modern pluralistic and religiously neutral state. The more theological education is integrated in academic pluralistic

⁸ Hadsell, Heidi/ Stükelberger, Christoph (eds.), *Overcoming Fundamentalism. Ethical Responses from Five Continents*. Globethics.net: Geneva 2009.

⁹ Fernando, Joseph I, *Religious Fundamentalism and an Ethics of Recognition*, in Hadsell, Heidi/ Stükelberger, Christoph (eds.), *Overcoming Fundamentalism. Ethical Responses from Five Continents*. Globethics.net: Geneva 2009, 69-88 (82f).

institutions and the less it is isolated in closed seminaries, Islamic schools or Buddhist and Hindu monasteries, the more likely it is that fundamentalisms, extremisms and exceptionalisms can grow. It is therefore of vital interest of parliaments and governments to integrate theological education in normal state education. Islamic extremism in the last decades opened the eyes in many countries that this is the way to go: integrate Islamic theological education in public universities, including those in countries with a predominant Christian population. But this integration must also be done in huge countries such as China with its secular ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’ and include some aspects of Confucianism. In addition, academic recognition of theological education in public universities, be it Christian, Buddhist, Daoist or Islamic, would help forge peaceful and sustainable development of the nation.

4.9 Ethical response 5: Only the divine is outstanding, exceptional

The ultimate religious and ethical response to exceptionalism is the understanding of the Divine itself. The Divine has different names in the different religions: Yahweh, God, Allah, Buddha, the Gods and Goddesses in Hinduism etc. One feature is common to all of them: the Divine is above the human. The Divine is absolute, the human is relative. The Divine is perfect, the human is imperfect. The Divine is eternal, unlimited in time, the human is limited in time.

Therefore, acknowledgement of the Divine level is essential to defeating exceptionalism. No human and no nationality, ethnicity, race, gender or faith is exceptional in the sense of absolute, outstanding and unique. There is only one absolute, outstanding, unique and exceptional entity: The Divine. Even in so-called non-religious cultures, this is still recognized. Above the Caesar and the kings, is the highest. Even if rulers have been seen as blessed by the Divine, they are not the Divine, and when some Caesars claimed to be God, like in the Roman and other empires, it

was a sign of the regression and final decline of the empire. In both ancient and Imperial China there was the religious and political awareness that the power of the king or emperor was not from himself (not herself, as in ancient time there was no female emperor), but granted as a mandate of heaven (天命, Tianming). If heaven above the Caesar was not respected as highest, then the people were entitled to rebellion and revolution, as did happen several times in China's dynasties. It is just one example of the deeply rooted awareness in humanity that there is only one truly exceptional entity: the Divine.