SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Comprehending "Human Exceptionalism"

A loaded term that has implications in a theological sense as well as in an evolutionary/scientific perspective.

Epistemic Understanding of Human Exceptionalism

Human exceptionalism is a concept that acknowledges the uniqueness of humans. It asserts that humans, as a species, possess certain characteristics or attributes that set them apart from other living organisms. Some key aspects of human exceptionalism include:

Cognitive and Intellectual Abilities: Human exceptionalism recognizes that humans have significantly advanced cognitive and intellectual abilities compared to other species. This includes complex thinking, problem-solving, language, and the development of advanced cultures and societies.

Moral and Ethical Reasoning: Humans possess and emphasize the development of moral and ethical reasoning, which has led to complex ethical systems and the ability to ponder questions of right and wrong.

Self-awareness and Consciousness: Humans are believed to possess a high level of self-awareness and consciousness, enabling them to reflect on their own existence, the nature of reality, and their place in the world.

***Religious and Spiritual Beliefs*:** Many proponents of human exceptionalism argue that humans have a unique capacity for religious and spiritual beliefs, often resulting in the search for meaning and purpose in life.

Theological Understanding of Human Exceptionalism

The theological perspective combines all of these key elements mentioned epistemically and adds on the fact that humans have been favored with divine guidance through human messengers who instruct moral and ethical reasoning privileged to human beings.

[Note: There is some overlap between humans and jinn in some of these key aspects, but because we do not have access to much knowledge, especially empirical knowledge about the jinn, we are not discussing them here and are focused on speaking of exceptionalism in the context of humans versus other creation that we can observe.]

Divine Creation: "Special creation" (in the theological sense) is a concept rooted in religious traditions and it is based on the belief in the special creation of the first human, Adam (pbuh), and subsequently the first woman, Ḥawwā (pbuh), were created directly by God, as described in religious texts. This is clearly mentioned in the Quran 38:71-71, 75. (This creation event is seen as distinct from the natural processes of evolution.)

Best Form: *Waḥy* (revelation) defines the human being to be in the best form, proportionately designed, in perfect measures. As mentioned in the Quran: "We have created humans in the best of forms" (Sūrah At-Tin 95:4). This best form places human beings on an exceptional level in comparison to other creations and living beings.

Speech: The ability of humans to communicate in a linguistic manner, vocally as well as through literature, is another unique quality. In Sūrah Ar-Rahman (55:2-3), Allah (swt) explains that "He has created man. He has taught him eloquence (how to express himself)."

Knowledge: Connecting back to Adam (pbuh) as the first of all human beings, in Sūrah Al-Baqarah (2:31), Allah (swt) says: "He taught Adam the names of all things, then He presented them to the angels and said, 'Tell Me the names of these, if what you say is true?'"

- This particular verse highlights the knowledge and wisdom granted to Adam (pbuh) by Allah (swt) directly. The angels, in contrast, were unable to provide the names, emphasizing the unique knowledge bestowed upon Adam (pbuh), even above the angels.

Humanity's Special Relationship with God: Humans have a unique relationship with their Creator and are distinct from other creatures by way of what has been bestowed on them. Human beings have been given divine guidance via scriptures and Prophets/Messengers, characteristic of Divine Mercy. This ties further to human salvation and a return to their previous dwelling place (with Allah (swt) in Jannah). This emphasizes the importance of moral and spiritual considerations in human existence. Human exceptionalism also refers to one's ability to receive knowledge of wahy (an expanded source of knowledge) not given to other creations.

Human Responsibility: This exceptional status that humans have been given comes with a level of responsibility and authority in this world/earth.

- Human beings are bound by the Shari'a and its injunctions and have a responsibility to implement it, uphold it, and spread it.
- The earth has been designed to cater to our needs as humans; therefore, we have the right to take what is needed. It is also an amānah, a trust, and therefore resources should be used according to the Shari'a.
- Humans have been assigned the responsibility/obligation to uphold the rights of others and the rights of Allah (swt) on this earth.

There is an understanding of different levels of exceptionalism, even among humanity:

Exceptionalism of ALL humans: Allah (swt) says in the Qur'an (Sūrah al-Isra' 17:70). "And Indeed We have honored the children of Adam, and carried them on the land and sea, and granted them good and lawful provisions, and preferred/privileged them far above many of Our creatures." Islamic belief also stipulates humans as God's deputies (*khalīfah*) on earth. This is iterated in (Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:30), where Allah (swt) states to the angels, "I am going to create a deputy/successive authority on the earth."

From these verses, we see that human beings have been honored as well as given authority above other creations on this earth.

Exceptionalism of the Believer: From among the general collective of humans, there is a special hierarchy given to the believing people, particularly Muslims over the non-believers. Human exceptionalism is closely linked to religious beliefs about human salvation and the relationship between humanity and God. The choice to believe and actually believe in God is what elevates the status of human beings in the eyes of God. As mentioned in the Qurʾan, Allah (swt) states, "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you (who has *taqwā*). Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Aware." (Sūrah Al-Hujurat, 49:13). *Taqwā*, God-consciousness, can only truly be achieved by a believer. Allah (swt) further says in the Qurʾan, "And it is He who made you the vicegerents of the earth and raised some of you in ranks over others, so that He may test you in what He has given you. Surely, your Lord is swift in punishing and surely He is Most-Forgiving, Very-Merciful." (Sūrah al-Anʿām, 6:165)

Prophetic Exceptionalism: From among the believers, a group is elevated, which are the Prophets of God. There are specific aspects that distinguish Prophets in Islam as exceptional individuals chosen by God to fulfill the critical role of guiding humanity. Their lives, teachings, and the divine support they received are central to Islamic belief and serve as a foundation for moral and spiritual guidance.

> ***Divine Selection:*** Prophets are chosen by God for their roles. The Quran emphasizes that Prophets are selected by God's will to deliver His message to humanity. Their leadership is divinely inspired, aiming to bring people closer to God and to establish societies based on justice and righteousness.

> ***Moral and Ethical Excellence:*** Prophets are models of moral and ethical excellence. They are known for their honesty, integrity, patience, and trustworthiness. They are meant to serve as examples for all people to follow. Islamic teachings assert that Prophets are protected by God from committing major sins, especially those that could undermine their credibility and the divine message they carry. This concept, known as *'ismah* (divine protection), ensures that Prophets maintain a high level of integrity and are reliable conveyors of God's message.

Revelation Receivers: Prophets are unique among humans in that they receive *waḥy* (revelation) from God. These revelations, which come in the form of scriptures or divine instructions, are meant to guide humanity. The Quran itself is considered the final revelation, given to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

Miracles: Many prophets are associated with miracles, which serve as signs of their prophethood and the truth of their message. These miracles, granted by the will of God, are beyond the capability of ordinary humans. For example, Musa (pbuh) parting the Red Sea (Sūrah al-Shuʿarāʾ 26:63) and Īsā (pbuh) healing the blind and the leper (Sūrah al-Īmrān 3:49) are miracles attributed to them in the Qurʾan.

The Exceptional among the Exceptional: There are five Prophets that are recognized as "Possessors of Resolve and Steadfastness" or *ulul azmi*. They are Nūḥ (pbuh), Ibrāhīm (pbuh), Musa (pbuh), Īsā (pbuh), and Muhammad (pbuh); the most exceptional of them all being Muhammad (pbuh). The Qurʾan describes the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as "the most beautiful example" for those who hope for Allah and the Last Day (Sūrah al-Aḥzāb, 33:21).

Exceptionalism of the Last Prophet, Muhammad (pbuh): From the special, elevated class of the Prophets, the most elevated human being is the last and final Prophet, Muhammad (pbuh). There is unanimous agreement among Muslim scholars that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is the greatest creation of Allah (swt), and no other created being has any status that is higher than his. In the effort to summarize the exceptionalism of the Prophet (pbuh) here are a few of the honors given uniquely to him: Allah (swt) took him as a close friend (*khalīl*); He made him the Seal of His Messengers; He revealed the best of His Books to him, and made his message one that applies to both mankind and the jinn until the Day of Resurrection; He caused miracles to happen at his hand that superseded those of all the Prophets who came before him; he will be the leader of the sons of Adam (on the Day of Resurrection), the first one for whom the grave will be opened, and the first one to intercede and the first one whose intercession will be accepted; in his hand will be a banner of praise on the Day of Resurrection; he will be the first one to cross the *ṣirāṭ* (a bridge across Hell), the first one to knock at the gate of Paradise and the first one to enter it, among many other unique characteristics and miracles that are mentioned in the Qurʾan and Sunnah. The fact that the Prophet (pbuh) is a human being gives honor and elevation to the human race.

Exceptionalism of Islam: Of all the religions and ways of life, Islam is singled out as the exceptional and only true *dīn* and way of life. There is a particular appreciation of being Muslim and following all the Prophets up to the very last Prophet, Muhammad (pbuh) (Sūrah al-Mā'idah 5:3) "This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favor upon you and have approved for you Islam as religion." Bestowing the perfected religion of Islam upon human beings is a completion of all the favors previously given to human beings by Allah (swt) (as listed above).

[NOTE: Due to the multiple understandings and perspectives the term Human "Exceptionalism" can take on, we have opted to use the term "Human Uniqueness" for clarity when referring to the theological exceptionalism of human beings (in reference to Unit 6 lessons).]

Evolutionary/Biological Understanding of Human Exceptionalism

An evolutionary biologist would likely define human exceptionalism in terms of unique evolutionary developments that set humans apart from other species. This could include advanced cognitive abilities, complex language, culture, and social structures, as well as the use of tools and technology. From this perspective, human exceptionalism is not a statement of humans being "better" than other species, but rather an acknowledgment of the distinct evolutionary path and capabilities that humans have developed over millions of years of evolution.

> This runs against traditionally held Islamic beliefs, particularly the belief that the origins of humankind began with the miraculous creations of Adam (pbuh) and Ḥawwā (pbuh) by God.

> In order to address this discrepancy, Muslim scholars and scientists have examined ways in which the divine creation of human beings can be juxtaposed into the traditional evolutionary perspective while respecting red lines.

Islam and Evolution: Book

One such Muslim scientist is Dr. Shoaib Ahmed Malik, who argues that a theology-centric approach can assist in reducing tensions, thus facilitating the understanding of Islam and evolution. In his book, *Islam and Evolution: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm* (Routledge, 2021), Dr. Malik explores various aspects of an Islamic perspective on evolution. In this context, he discusses two concepts: Human exceptionalism and Adamic exceptionalism.
(Scan QR Code to access the book.)

Human Exceptionalism versus Adamic Exceptionalism

Here the terms "Human Exceptionalism" vs "Adamic Exceptionalism" have very specific connotations in the discussion of evolution and Islam, and how (if at all) evolutionary processes apply to humans.

Human Exceptionalism: humans are an isolated species, no evolutionary connection.

This concept generally refers to the belief that humans are fundamentally different from and superior to other animals, owing to unique qualities such as rationality, morality, language, and a soul.

In many religious and philosophical traditions, human exceptionalism is based on the idea that humans have a special place in the universe or a unique relationship with the divine.

Therefore, humans are an exception to evolutionary processes and are not part of the Phylogenetic Tree of Life, eliminating humans from the idea of common ancestry.

Scientists call this widely spread way of thinking about the human-nature relationship "human exceptionalism"—when people believe that they exist independently of the ecosystems they live in and draw a sharp line between themselves and what is considered nature.

Adamic Exceptionalism: "Adamic Exceptionalism" is a term and concept originated with Dr. David Jalajel and developed further by Dr. Shoaib Malik. Adamic Exceptionalism holds that Adam (pbuh) and Ḥawwā (pbuh) were directly created by God but allows for their descendants to have interbred with other hominins resulting from evolution. It maintains that while humans are not inherently exceptional, Adam (pbuh) was uniquely created and endowed with special qualities. Proponents of this concept interpret Qur'anic verses to support this distinction, emphasizing Adam (pbuh)'s creation as the moment when unique human spiritual, moral, and intellectual capacities emerged.

> It is very important to note that Adamic exceptionalism is not substantiated by any revelatory evidence and is not supported by any classical authorities in the fields of *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, *kalām*, or *taṣawwuf*. Furthermore, there is scholarly consensus (*ijma'*) that Adam (pbuh) is the first human being.
> According to Dr. Malik, the idea of Adamic exceptionalism does not contradict revelatory evidence. He holds that since there is no direct evidence contravening it, it is possible, and rather than repudiating the idea, we would have to do *tawaqquf* (which is suspending judgment on a matter until more substantial information is obtained).

In the book *Islam and Evolution*, Dr. Shoaib Ahmed Malik discusses these concepts at length in relation to Islamic theology and how it intersects with modern evolutionary theory.
For more explanation, please view:

YouTube Video: "**Islam and Evolution with Professor Shoaib Ahmed Malik**," Blogging Theology, 9 Dec. 2021 (24:08).

- ***24:58*** *Four Positions on evolution*
- ***25:32*** *Creationism*
- ***27:58*** *No Exceptions*
- ***28:41*** *Human Exceptionalism*
- ***30:06*** *At what time did Adam (pbuh) exist?*
- ***33:04*** *Academic Exceptionalism*
- ***46:50*** *Qur'anic versus Scientific Perspective**

Islam and Evolution: Video