

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:** “Adamic exceptionalism” (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 A, and subsequently the first woman, Hawwa A, 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:** Wahy (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” (Surah At-Tin 95: Ayaat 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 Surah 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 (upon him be peace) as the first of all human beings, in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:31), Allah Almighty 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 (upon him be peace) by Allah Almighty directly. The angels, in contrast, were unable to provide the names, emphasizing the unique knowledge bestowed upon Adam (upon him be peace), 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 (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 of what is needed. It is also an amaanah, 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 Almighty on this earth.

There is an understanding of different levels of exceptionalism even amongst humanity:

- **Exceptionalism of ALL Humans:** Allah Almighty says in the Quran (Surah Al-Israa, 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 (khalifah) on earth. This is iterated in Surah Baqarah 2:30 where Allah Almighty 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 amongst 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 *believing* in God is what elevates the status of human beings in the eyes of God. As mentioned in the Quran, Allah Almighty 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 Allāh is the most righteous of you (who has taqwa). Indeed, Allāh is Knowing and Aware.” Taqwa, God-consciousness, can only truly be achieved by a believer. Allah Almighty further says in the Quran, “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.” (Surah Al-An'am 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 depicted as models of moral and ethical excellence. They are known for their honesty, integrity, patience, and trustworthiness. Their characters 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 wahy (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 ﷺ.
 - *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 (upon him be peace) parting the Red Sea (Surat al-Shu'ara 26:63) and Isa (upon him be peace) healing the blind and the leper (Surah Al-Imran 3:49) are miracles attributed to them in the Quran.
 - *The Exceptional amongst the Exceptional:* There are five Prophets that are recognized as even more exceptional, which has been termed *أولو العزم* “Possessors of Resolve/Steadfastness.” Of these five, which include Nuh (upon him be peace), Ibrahim (upon him be peace), Musa (upon him be peace), Isa (upon him be peace) and Muhammad ﷺ, the most exceptional of them all being Muhammad ﷺ. The Quran describes the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as “the most beautiful example” for those who hope in Allah and the Last Day (Surat Al-Ahzab 33:21).
- **Exceptionalism of the Last Prophet, Muhammad ﷺ:** From the special, elevated class of the Prophets, there is only one that is the most elevated human being, which is the Last and Final Prophet, Muhammad ﷺ. There is unanimous agreement amongst Muslim scholars that the Prophet ﷺ is the greatest of creation in status before Allah swt, and no other created being has



- any status that is higher than his or any power of intercession that is greater than his. In the effort to summarize the exceptionalism of the Prophet ﷺ there are a few of the honors given uniquely to him: Allah swt took him as a close friend (khalil); 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 al-siraat (a bridge across Hell), the first one to knock at the gate of Paradise and the first one to enter it, amongst many other unique characteristics and miracles that are mentioned in the Qur'an and Sunnah. The fact that the Prophet ﷺ 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 deen and way of life. There is a particular appreciation of being Muslim and following all the Prophets up to the very last Prophet, Muhammad ﷺ (Surah Maidah 5:3) "This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favor upon you and have approved for you Islām 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 Almighty (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 A and Hawwa A 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 as well as where red lines must be defined.
- One such Muslim scientist is Dr. Shoiab Ahmed Malik, who argues that a theology-centric approach can assist in reducing the observable tensions, thus facilitating the understanding of Islam and evolution. In his book, "[Islam and Evolution: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm](#)," Dr. Malik explores various aspects of the Islamic perspective on evolution. In this context, he discusses two concepts: human exceptionalism and Adamic exceptionalism.



Human Exceptionalism vs Adamic Exceptionalism

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

- **Human Exceptionalism:** 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, or 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:** maintains Adam A (and Hawwa A) as direct divine creation, but postulates that their descendant humans could have interbred with other hominins (who were already present on earth which were results of the evolutionary process).
 - Adamic exceptionalism, particularly in an Islamic context, refers to the idea that while humans in general may not be exceptional compared to other animals, the first human, Adam A, is. This belief holds that Adam A was created in a unique way (directly by God) and endowed with special qualities or a special role that subsequent humans did not inherit in the same way.
 - Qur'anic Interpretation: A primary source of evidence for Adamic exceptionalism in Islamic thought comes from interpretations of the Qur'an. The Qur'an describes the creation of Adam in a way that is often seen as distinct from the creation of other beings. Proponents of Adamic exceptionalism might argue that this narrative indicates a special, non-evolutionary creation for Adam A and his wife Hawwa A.
 - Theological arguments for Adamic exceptionalism often revolve around the unique status of humans in the Islamic worldview, particularly regarding spiritual, moral, and intellectual capacities. The creation of Adam is sometimes seen as the point at which these unique human qualities were introduced, qualities that are *not* a product of evolutionary processes.
 - This approach can reduce tensions because, while acknowledging evolutionary science, it maintains the theological stance on creation.
 - 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 even taṣawwuf. On the other hand, this idea of Adamic exceptionalism does not contradict revelatory evidence either. Therefore, since there is no information regarding it (for it or against it), as Dr. Malik clearly states, we would have
 -



- to do tawaqquf (which is suspending judgment on the matter until more substantial information is obtained).
 - ***One can not make claims about the ghaib (unseen) without scriptural references.***
 - When making a claim about a theological aspect (in this case about things God has or has not done in the past), *very clear* scriptural references are needed. [If scripture does not say anything about a matter, it can not be turned into a theological issue.] This is the understanding of Tawaqquf in the theological sense.
 - Affirmation and negation are compossible.
 - The point to consider is that there is a difference between the *theological* human and the *biological* human being. [These two categories may or may not be the same.]
 - Adam (upon him be peace) and Hawwa (upon her be peace) *and* their descendants are ***theological certainties*** due to clear scriptural texts. All human beings can be traced back to them as well.
 - In terms of the biological human being, *tawaqquf* is done due to no scriptural mention. [Therefore, the concept of pre-existing humans or human-like beings existing due to an evolutionary process is something that could have or could not have happened. No scriptural basis to confirm either position of what coexisted.]

In the book "Islam and Evolution," these concepts are discussed at length in relation to Islamic theology and how it intersects with modern evolutionary theory. Human exceptionalism might be contrasted with evolutionary perspectives that do not inherently set humans apart from other animals, while Adamic exceptionalism provides a way to integrate the specific Islamic creation narrative of Adam A into a broader acceptance of evolutionary processes.

For a quick review and explanation, please view: [Islam and evolution with Professor Shoaib Ahmed Malik](#)

starting from 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 - Adam Exceptionalism

46:50 - Quranic vs Scientific Perspective*

[Keep in mind that the biological evolution framework is zanni/probabilistic, whereas the religious text (i.e Quran) regarding the origin of humans is qat'i/conclusive.]