

BOOK REVIEWS

The Perils of Human Exceptionalism: Elements of a Nineteenth-Century Theological Anthropology

Dennis L. Durst, Lexington Books, 2022

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Theologian Dennis Durst's *The Perils of Human Exceptionalism* is a historical theological anthropology on the intellectual history of the 19th century that impacted human exceptionalism. Durst employs human exceptionalism as a theological term that refers to "the conviction that human beings are made in the image of God, as ensouled bodies, integrating intellectual, emotional, social, psychological, and moral dimensions of human life into a flourishing whole, and are different in kind from nonhuman creatures" (p. 1). Durst casts a capacious net over the intellectual landscape, covering the writings of the nineteenth century on philosophical, theological, psychological, and biological anthropology.

Why or to what end did Durst write the book? The end seems to be to give his readers a better understanding of an overall picture of the ebbs and flows of the traditional understanding of human exceptionalism and how its overall cultural authority waned in the 19th century. As such, the book does not state a theological proposition and defend it. It is not argumentative nor polemical but historical and informational. Also, it is obvious, though not argued for, that Durst is sympathetic towards traditional theological understandings of human exceptionalism.

Why did Durst write about the 19th century and not some other century? A response is not clear from the book, though it might be because of the plethora of writings and challenges of the topic. That is, the 19th century changed the theological understanding of human exceptionalism. Any theologian that would want to retain a traditional understanding would thereafter have to nuance it in response to these challenges.

So also, what criteria did Durst use to choose the views he would cover? As Durst mentions, he could not cover all the significant intellectuals that treat the topic at hand. Instead, he focused on the emerging and increasing conflict between science and religion and the responses of natural theology and intuitionism. Nonetheless, there seem to be some significant omissions. Maybe there are reasons for these, but more explanation was needed in this regard. Here are three examples:

First, Durst, in Chapter 1, "Historical Prologue," focuses on two theological issues of traditional human exceptionalism prior to the 19th century, "the image of God and its implications on the origin and nature of the soul" (p. 13). If so, why not include one of the most well-known and influential views on the image of God and the nature of the soul, that in Augustine's *De Trinitate*? According to Augustine, a likeness exists between human beings and the Trinity. Since God is Trinity and created humans in his image and likeness, God created humans after the image and

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likeness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Augustine then reflects on possible triune structures of the human mind or soul that image God.

Second, though mentioned in several places, Karl Marx's philosophy should have been explained in its own section and more thoroughly. Why? Marx's anthropology is relevant to the theme of the book because of the pseudo-scientific laws he touted that went against human exceptionalism. According to Marx's philosophical anthropology, human beings act and react in strict adherence to the laws of human science. These laws are anthropological-economic that apply to the different epochs of history as well as the status of the individuals in those epochs. The laws differentiate between those that "have," would-be oppressors, and those that "have not," would-be oppressed. These lead humanity, inexorably, to the final communistic epoch. Phrenology, a pseudo-science covered by Durst, though interesting, had a lesser impact on human exceptionalism than Marx's theory. In addition, Marx's dichotomization of society into two basic social identities, oppressors or oppressed, has only increased in influence.

Third, Durst missed an opportunity to explain a philosophical anthropological theory that became well known in the 19th century and that now has greater significance, the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (a term used for the theory in the late 20th century). In his section on Nietzsche, Durst alludes to the theory, calling it "School for Suspicion," but hardly explains it. The hermeneutics of suspicion is a hermeneutical theory in which texts include a deeper, hidden meaning that, in many instances, connects with social power dynamics. In the case of Nietzsche, though religion seems concerned with the afterlife, the deeper hidden meaning was that it was a refuge for the weak. The hermeneutics of suspicion is significant not only because influential anthropological thinkers of the 19th century such as Nietzsche and Marx adopted a version of it but because of the theory's resurgence in the current social justice movement.

Despite these omissions, there are many reasons to laud the book. Durst has done an impressive job of distilling from the writings of secular and non-secular 19th century intellectuals and their significant ideas on the intersection of science and theological anthropology. This allows the reader to glean interesting historical facts, such as how much influence the Romantic Era had on anthropology and human exceptionalism. No longer would people mainly employ rational deliberation to explore human nature and its significance. Instead, many intellectuals relied on emotions, feelings, and intuitions, and assumed individualism to inform their understanding of anthropology. We see examples of this in the philosophies and theories of Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, transcendentalists, unitarians, and others.

Also, Durst has summarized in a succinct and accessible manner some direct challenges of "anti-theologians" to human exceptionalism in the 19th century. The best example of this is Durst's summary of Nietzsche, for his writings are hard to understand in places. Yet, Nietzsche's anti-metaphysics, epistemological and ethical relativism, pragmatism, anti-theism, and human determinism are explained in an accessible manner.

Further, Durst at times demonstrates the close connection and molding of human exceptional ideas by historical events. For example, the industrial revolution imperiled human exceptionalism through the profound societal changes it created, such as creating an imbalance between the individual and social concerns. Individuals suffered for the sake of social concerns, producing

a diminished view of human dignity and exceptionalism. Another example is the interesting historical contrast between Darwin's undermining of human exceptionalism by putting humans more on par with the non-rational animals, all this while social reformers fought on the side of workers in the industrial revolution. Woman's suffrage and slave emancipation also defended human exceptionalism during this era.

Last, throughout most of the book, Durst did not focus on theological anthropology, though the topic came up many times. Nonetheless he dedicated two chapters towards the end of the book to this topic. There he covers diverse views on the human soul and original sin. These chapters help put the previous chapters in a theological perspective.

In conclusion, though Durst's book is academic, it is accessible to a lay audience with some understanding of the historical figures and movements within anthropology. I would therefore recommend it to those interested in understanding the challenges of theological or philosophical anthropology for grounding bioethics on human dignity. I would also recommend this book to academics doing research within theological and philosophical anthropology who want to figure out which philosophies are more fruitful than others for their research goals.