

1

EXCEPTIONALISM

That which is hath been long ago, and that which is to be hath already been.

—Ecclesiastes 3:15

WE SHOULD ACKNOWLEDGE WHAT SEEMS INCONTROVERTIBLE: PEOPLE in the West are freer, richer, more tolerant, more innovative, and happier than people just about anywhere else in the world.¹ But then we should also recognize that despite holistic claims of “Western exceptionalism,” there is tremendous variation in how well people are doing in different parts of the Western world. Declarations that Westerners are superior are puzzling, offensive, and just plain foolish when looked at over the long drift of history. The explanations for “Western exceptionalism” that rely on claims of superior culture, superior religious beliefs, or superior people cannot withstand even a whit of scrutiny. More plausibly, some scholars, starting with such luminaries as the Scottish economist Adam Smith and the German sociologist Max Weber, say that parts of Europe—England, the Netherlands, and even, for a time, Otto von Bismarck’s Germany leap to mind—gained a leg up because they adopted capitalism ahead of others. Yet this belief is far from universal: others, such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, argued that capitalism doomed many Europeans to misery and revolution; they made a case that was persuasive to millions of people in Europe, as well as to major

political parties such as the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany, the Labour Party in Britain, and Léon Blum's Popular Front government in France (1936–1940). According to this view, Western exceptionalism is rooted not in capitalism but in its opposite, socialism.

Yet these are only the broadest of arguments. There are also somewhat more detailed cases for exceptionalism. One holds that it resulted from changes in the Catholic Church's understanding of marriage and family and how those changes altered kinship relations and expanded the church's reach.² Another says that Europe's success was due to the spread of literacy engendered by Johannes Gutenberg's publication of the Bible in the 1450s,³ followed not long after by the rise of the Protestant Reformation.⁴ Yet here is a third idea that cuts against those two: maybe it was dumb luck. Modern Europe and its Western offshoots might have been created when an Italian, flying the Spanish flag, sailed the ocean blue in 1492, stumbling on the "New World" and the opportunity to benefit from all of its riches.

There are doubtless plenty more theories. I am not, after all, posing a new puzzle. As we will see, events in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries certainly reinforced and extended the development of European exceptionalism, but those events cannot be the "big bang" that set Europe apart from the rest of the world because Europe's exceptional social, economic, and political course was already well established long before Gutenberg, Luther, and the rise of Protestant Germany. Lots of earlier developments may also have contributed to Europe's remarkable development, but we will see that the path from pre-twelfth-century European misery to "exceptionalism" does not require them. Most importantly, accounts grounded in some variant of "Europeans have a superior culture," "Europeans are harder-working, smarter people," or "Europe's God and religions are superior" will be seen to be misguided and wrong.

There is no good reason to believe that Europeans are inherently smarter, genetically more creative, or culturally superior to other people. It is hard to imagine that Britons, Belgians, or Germans are

just smarter, more creative, more tolerant, or obviously superior to Egyptians, Peruvians, or anyone else. Egyptians looked a lot more capable five thousand years ago than folks living in the territories that today are called Germany or France or England. The Phoenicians of Tyre, Sidon, and Carthage were doing a heck of a lot better than were Belgians or Britons four thousand years ago, and in fact, they were doing better for hundreds of years after the collapse of the Roman Empire. And there is no reason to think that today's Belgians or Dutch are superior to the Chinese, or the Germans to the Austrians, or the French to the Czechs, Argentines, or Nigerians. Every place has had good times and bad times. It is puzzling why western Europe and its settler offshoots are having such a good time now, why some in the West are having so much better a time of it than others, and why, compared to the rest of the world, a lot of the folks in western Europe have been having a better time for nearly a thousand years.

The record of the long-ago past suggests that Europeans were not exceptionally good at just about anything a thousand or more years ago. After the Roman Empire died in the mid-fifth century, today's "exceptional" Europe was a mess that for hundreds of years did little to invent, discover, or improve life's conditions. Rather, Western Europe first began to become the breeding ground for innovation in art, literature, government, and science during what was once mistakenly and derisively referred to as "the Dark Ages," nearly a thousand years ago. Especially beginning with the twelfth century, Europe began to part ways with the rest of the globe, innovating when others stagnated. The leaders of western Europe began grudgingly to reward change and those who created it. In fits and starts, with stumbles as well as massive retreats, with more or less success in different parts of the continent, Europe left much of the world behind in successfully separating religion from government and in promoting secularism, prosperity, freedom, and discovery. Of course, that does not mean that Europe's "success" will continue, nor does it mean that everyone agrees that Europe is more successful rather than just different. Maybe Europeans won't seem better—or different—at these things in a thousand years or even in

fifty years, although I am betting on Europe and its settler offshoots to continue to provide a really high quality of life for a long time to come. By the last chapter, building toward it all along the way, it should be clear why I would make that bet. Hint: it has nothing to do with European superiority.

THREE TREATIES ABOUT POWER AND MONEY **CHANGED EUROPE**

I am going to explore history, logic, and lots of evidence in my effort to persuade you that today's diverse degrees of "exceptionalism" in different parts of Europe are the consequence of three similar, equally obscure deals. The first two were agreed to by the Catholic Church and the kings of England and France in 1107. The main deal—an agreement of less than five hundred words in Latin—was signed on September 23, 1122, and applied to all the kingdoms and territory of the vast Holy Roman Empire. That deal, the Concordat of Worms, like its predecessor agreements, is unknown to almost everyone other than medieval scholars. It did not in any obvious way address the creation of prosperity, freedom, tolerance, or anything else that makes us think the European/Western world is "exceptional." The agreement signed on that day essentially just said three things.

First, the Catholic Church had the exclusive right to nominate bishops. Second, the Holy Roman Emperor, along with some other kings, had the right to accept or reject whoever was nominated. Third, if the nominee was rejected, then the secular ruler over the relevant Catholic diocese got to keep the bishopric's revenue until an acceptable bishop was nominated and installed.⁵

This hardly sounds like a monumental contract that would change the world, and yet that is exactly what it did. We will see that the reason parts of Europe leaped ahead in prosperity, secularism, religious freedom, and social and governmental accountability is simple: two of Europe's great powers at the time—Pope Calixtus II and the Holy Roman emperor, Henry V—agreed at Worms on how to

compete with each other for political dominance by trading money for power and power for money. They accepted the rules of that competition on September 23, 1122, and their deal changed everything.

In ways hardly anyone could imagine at the time, the deal signed in the ancient city of Worms, less than forty miles from modern Frankfurt, transformed the incentives of the Catholic Church, Europe's temporal leaders, its lesser lords, merchants, and peasants for centuries afterward and even up to the very present. The interplay of wealth, secularism, and distance from Rome became critical in ways that had not previously existed for the people in the Catholic dioceses that together defined the map of Europe. The interplay of diocesan money, power, and distance shaped the way the myriad of bishops and monarchs dealt with each other, reshaping the institutions and rules in the kingdoms they made up.

Hard as it must be to believe that a deal agreed to in 1122 changed Europe's economic, political, and social trajectory, it is even more remarkable to realize that the consequences of the logic put into motion at Worms is still at work in today's Europe. As we will see in [Chapter 8](#), some of the most profound differences across European countries today can be tied to the conditions of their bishoprics starting nine hundred years ago. To illustrate that thought, let's pause to look at some surprising current facts whose meaning and causes we can ponder as the logic of the treaty signed in Worms—and its impact on “Western exceptionalism”—unfolds before us.

It seems odd that today's average Belgian works just a few more hours per year than does the average Briton, and yet the typical British worker earns \$4,017 less over that year. The discrepancy between work and pay is even more pronounced—and surprising—if we compare the Netherlands and Germany, neighboring countries whose culture and history have been closely intertwined for centuries. Despite their similarities, the average German worked just 1,386 hours in 2019, and the average Dutchman 1,434, giving Germans the equivalent of about one extra week of vacation time. But for that one extra week of leisure, the German earned nearly

\$6,000 less. That seems like a really heavy price for a little more time off.⁶ Why are the Brits making so much less than the Belgians, and the Germans so much less than the Dutch? What's going on here?

Certainly the disparity must have a lot to do with differences in the policies currently followed by these governments. Perhaps it is due to differences in the strength of labor unions or of businesses. Maybe it has something to do with Germany being more Catholic than the Netherlands. But those religious differences do not help explain why Belgium, a predominantly Catholic country, is doing better today on income than Britain, a predominantly Protestant country. These and other differences across many European nations probably have lots of explanations that come quickly to mind, as well as lots of reasons to doubt those explanations.

Few commentators are likely to suspect that all this has anything to do with the concordats signed in Germany, England, or France in the twelfth century, even though all the countries mentioned—England, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium—were subject to those long-ago treaties. Just as surely, it is hard to imagine that today's incomes are related to the selection of Roman Catholic bishops between 1122 and 1309, the years when, for reasons internal to the logic of the concordats, the conditions behind the selection and consecration of bishops fundamentally changed. And yet nearly 38 percent of Dutch bishops between 1122 and 1309 and almost 63 percent of bishops in what today makes up Belgium had worked for their king, prince, duke, or other local ruler before being chosen to head a diocese, while the same was true of only one-sixth of German bishops and of a bit over one-quarter of English bishops during those years. If we ask what percentage of bishops subject to a concordat in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries worked in the secular world rather than the religious world just before becoming a bishop, we discover that the answer predicts today's incomes pretty darn well. Countries that enjoy a better quality of life today—better life expectancy, more-accountable government, and more money—are the same ones that began hiring bishops with a relationship to

their kings in the twelfth century. And those differences today can and will be tied directly to the altered incentives created by the Concordat of Worms and its French and English predecessors.

Of course, the correlation between the relations of bishops to kings nine hundred years ago and incomes today in a much broader array of countries than just England, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany does not assure causation. The correlation between the “secularism” of bishops so long ago and the leisure time of workers today, for instance, might just be an odd, cute fact. It might have nothing to do with anything important today, like differences in freedom, prosperity, tolerance, health, or innovativeness across the Western world. Or perhaps there was something about what was going on in Europe nine hundred years ago that still matters today. Maybe choices made so long ago laid a pathway to better or worse outcomes today in different parts of Europe regardless of cultural, governmental, or religious similarities then. Maybe it is not just a cute set of facts and coincidental correlations. Maybe to understand “Western exceptionalism” we need to understand the logical, strategic consequences of an obscure deal struck in 1122. If that is true, then we have to reconsider much of what we think we know about the history behind the modern world.

Indeed, we will examine how individual decisions by popes and kings, made for individual advantages, translated into the sorts of macrolevel, high-altitude effects that others have highlighted as the source of “Western exceptionalism.” It will be apparent that neither church policy on its own nor decisions by secular rulers outside their competition with the church over power and money were behind Europe’s remarkable performance in promoting prosperity, secularism, democracy, religious tolerance, and innovativeness. We will see that it was instead the terms of the concordats, combined with local conditions, that determined the balance of bargaining leverage and policy choices across Europe in ways that shaped what Europe and its Western offshoots look like today.

THINK OF POPES AND KINGS AS SELF-INTERESTED

To evaluate the shifting influence of the church, monarchs, and their nascent states from a strategic perspective, we need to agree on a few ground rules about how we assess hundreds of years of history and the thousands of bishops and kings whose decisions eventually led to Western exceptionalism. I propose that we agree to take a cynical view of human nature, putting aside any optimism we might have about kings and popes (or anyone else) doing what they thought was good for their subjects or what might have been good for the long-term future of their empires and their church, respectively. That is not to suggest that they had anything against helping others; rather, it is to say that whenever they faced a conflict between helping others or helping themselves, we will understand their choices better if we assume that they mostly did what they believed was good for themselves.

That means that they were paying attention to what they believed would be the consequences of their decisions for their future. Kings and popes were playing multidimensional chess against a great many rival kings, bishops, and other opponents simultaneously. They had hard jobs staying in power, keeping track of dangerous, complex challenges, while trying to advance their own interests. Those who were not good at looking ahead probably ended up overthrown and maybe even headed for an early death. Much of the time they just could not safely do whatever they most wanted to do; instead, they constantly had to adjust, choosing their next move and the move after that, considering carefully what moves their rivals would make in response to their doing this or that or something else. It gives us a headache just thinking about thinking so far ahead, but maybe that is why most of us wouldn't want to be a pope or king.

All of that is to say that I rely on game theoretic reasoning where appropriate to offer a plausible, logically structured way of working through and making sense of critical developments that contributed to Europe's later success. "Game theory" is a fancy term for thinking about something all of us do all the time. It helps us ask thoughtfully what people will most probably do when they have to take into account not just what they themselves desire but also what other people want and what others are likely to do. This way of thinking

recognizes that what any king, pope, peasant, merchant, banker, or anyone else in the Middle Ages chose to do depended on three things: (1) what the chooser valued, (2) what constraints limited the chooser from going after his or her heart's desires, and (3) what the best decisions were in the face of uncertainty about the situation or the things rivals and allies were prepared to do.

Although what people want—what is in their heart of hearts—might be the product of learned psychological states, the culture within which they were raised, their religious beliefs, or their personal experiences, here the concern is not with the sources of their preferences or desires but, rather, with their strategic maneuvering to advance their objectives when faced with challenges and threats from others whose desires are different from and incompatible with theirs.⁷ Thus, in my perspective, individuals are not captives of a certain set of norms and values; rather, they are ready to adjust and alter these considerations when they believe it will improve their lot.

There is a limit to what can be known about how people made decisions hundreds of years ago. Maybe, like Nostradamus in the sixteenth century, they stared into bowls of water to figure out what they thought they should do. Or maybe they sought guidance by looking at the stars or at sheep entrails to figure out the omens and odds of success. Maybe they consulted friends and relatives or authority figures, such as priests or local dignitaries, to help them choose. However they thought about their situation, the ability to plan consciously, to build shelter for warmth and to make tools to hunt and harvest food, is a hallmark of the human experience. One way or another, people have always adjusted what they do in light of the obstacles put in their way. Neither we today nor popes and kings nearly a millennium ago blindly do whatever we want.

We and our Middle Ages predecessors consider the costs, the benefits, the risks, and the uncertainties behind our choices and then, faced with difficult decisions, we do the best we can. Of course, constraints on choices and uncertainty about the situation or the desires of others can always lead to what turn out to be wrong choices. Nevertheless, if we can put ourselves in our ancestors'

shoes, taking advantage only of the things they could have or should have known at the moment, then we ought to be able to figure out why they did what they did, making their decisions predictable for us and for them. For instance, with the benefit of hindsight, today's pope might wish that Calixtus II had negotiated a different deal with the Holy Roman emperor in 1122. But Calixtus, like all of us, could only cut a deal based on what he knew and what he believed at the time. To use an anachronistic metaphor, Monday-morning quarterbacking is irrelevant. All of us act only on what we know and what we believe at the moment we must act; we do not get to rewrite history to make things come out better. Indeed, even if Calixtus or Henry V could see what they were building in the distant future, they probably would not have cared. Remember, we are thinking about self-interested people: they are interested in whether their actions are good for themselves and for what they value at the moment—and perhaps for *their* own eternity as well—and not in whoever else their decisions turned out to benefit a year or two later, let alone nine hundred years later. They were not trying to choose for the ages; they were trying to seize the day for themselves.

The game theoretic approach adds one more consideration that we should keep in mind because it is an important departure from how historians tackle the past. Historians are primarily interested in what happened and so, naturally, examine the unfolding of observed events rather than taking a strategically driven look at what did not happen and at how what did not happen influenced what did happen. Other scholars, such as economists, psychologists, and economic historians, are more tuned in to finding out *why* things happened, but their research has given limited attention to the pre-Reformation division of European wealth and power. Game theory requires us always to think about what did not happen—what choices were rejected—at least as much as about what did happen. By paying attention both to what happened and what did not happen, we will see that events played out as they did—quite differently in different parts of Europe—because of the altered incentives created by the concordats.⁸

Once the game theoretic logic is laid out, it will be matched up with a detailed analysis of a large body of information about many thousands of bishops, a few thousand monarchs, and hundreds of dioceses, and it will be complemented with anecdotal or documentary evidence as well. Our dive into history and its available evidence will be designed specifically to evaluate whether the incentives implied by the shifting strategic setting created in 1122 in fact led to fundamental, predictable, and consequential shifts in the behavior of kings and popes and others with a deep stake in the outcome of the contest for power between the secular and the sacred, between Caesar and God.

Don't get me wrong. Major developments are almost never caused by a single event, and this is certainly true of Europe's political, economic, and religious evolution that created the basis for Western exceptionalism. We should not expect a perfect fit between the effects of the concordats and outcomes in every nook and cranny of Europe. Too much else was going on, and it is too difficult to measure key ideas precisely. What we should expect and demand is strong consistency between the argument and the evidence. What will be evident, and maybe surprising, is how much of Europe's evolution was punctuated by the events leading up to the concordats and by the details of the deal struck at Worms and its precursors in England and France.

It is particularly noteworthy how swiftly Europe began to part ways from the rest of the world once the struggle between the church and secular rulers over political control was out in the open by 1046. That year marked a crucial moment that set the Investiture Controversy in motion: the living pope was deposed by the Holy Roman emperor. The struggle begun in 1046 was resolved by the treaty in Worms almost eighty years later. Prior to the Concordat of Worms, Europe was not alone in many of its initial leaps forward (or backward), but from that time onward, its growth began to diverge sharply from that of other countries. Indeed, much of the rest of the world was busy doing remarkable things long before Europe surged ahead yet proved unable to keep up once Europe's strategic environment was reset in September 1122. Europe's cultures had not changed. Its

religion had not changed. Its people had not changed. What had changed were the incentives of its secular and its clerical leaders.

SHORT-TERM DECISIONS, LASTING CONSEQUENCES

Today, Europe's support for individual rights in every corner of life has made people dream of migrating to the Western world, even risking their lives to share in its freedoms and prosperity. But that is now; it was neither always nor inevitably so. For centuries, and even within the twentieth century, western Europe, like so much of the rest of the earth, was a place from which people fled. They ran for their lives as tyranny threatened to replace freedom and as a privileged few threatened to control and oppress the prosaic many. It is a place whose present special accomplishments did not arise easily, quickly, or cheaply.

Good results do not always follow from carefully laid plans. Indeed, through all the struggles and across all the fits and starts over two millennia that gradually created modern Western exceptionalism, it seems unlikely that anyone had the promotion of freedom and tolerance in mind. Certainly, the fourth-century artist who made the oldest known portrait of the first pope, the apostle Saint Peter, did not contemplate that his or her fresco would be looked upon 1,700 years later not just as a religious (or political) statement but as an artistic one as well.⁹ And equally, that artist's approximate contemporary, the sculptor who gave us the bust of the Roman emperor Constantine in the fourth century,¹⁰ would have had no inkling that the followers of Saint Peter would manage to quash secular images like his, along with secular ideas, for many centuries. These artists could not have imagined the part they were playing in the unfolding drama between the secular and the sacred. That drama, against all expectations and despite tremendous efforts to reverse the tide of tolerance, culminated in the modern West. No one a thousand and more years ago, looking to the distant future, would have dreamed of anything like the social, economic, and political contours of today's West. No pope, no king, no philosopher could

have imagined, or would have wished for, the range of tolerance that is nevertheless the product of the myriad decisions they made so long ago, decisions that moved the West in the direction of freedom even when powerful efforts to restore intolerance, efforts as recent as Adolf Hitler's and Joseph Stalin's, rose to reverse the now firmer but always fragile course of a tolerant modernity.

To grasp why western Europeans, and their far-flung settler offshoots, more than just about any other people, nurture freedom, innovation, and competition, we must uncover and understand the meticulously calculated, strategically sophisticated decisions that were made by popes, kings, aristocrats, and ordinary people during the so-called age of superstition, a millennium and more ago. That means that after briefly touching on the rest of the world in relation to Europe, we must focus on what was varying *across Europe* at the expense of a more detailed comparison of Europe to the rest of the world.¹¹ The evolution of what is special about Europe is the product of internal competition and differences in internal choices. Indeed, these dynamics are more potent than any unified decisions about how to cope with forces external to what is now understood as the West, changes such as the expansion of Islam or the arrival of Genghis Khan on Europe's edges, which were described as threats to Europe nearly a thousand and more years ago.

Not that these and other external events were inconsequential. Change is much too complicated to rule out the role of external developments, but the purpose here is to understand how European decisions about life in Europe influenced outcomes, putting aside the important but, I believe, secondary part played by medieval and premedieval Europe's interaction with other parts of the globe. We will come to realize that Europe's exceptionalism can be mostly explained by the conflicts and choices of popes, kings, aristocrats, and common people, conflicts and choices framed by individual, narrow interests and not by destiny, design, or desire.

EUROPE: UNEXPECTED EXCEPTIONALISM

In trying to understand why Europe did so well while other parts of the world did not, we first of all need to know that no one living in the year 1000 would have claimed to be enjoying any such good fortune. Over the previous thousand years, starting roughly with the birth of Jesus, Europe's quality of life had declined sharply; it was the fairly new Islamic world, born at the time of Muhammad's move from Mecca to Medina in 622, that would have looked exceptional. To a first-millennium millennial, the idea that there was something exceptional about Europe would have seemed odd, ill-informed, and maybe even laughable. Only when we look at the second millennium of the Common Era do we see a reason to believe that today's Western world is special.

We can only examine life's conditions in the first millennium with a wide range of uncertainty, as reliable and detailed information is hard to come by for conditions a thousand to two thousand years ago. Still, as a starting place, though not our only starting place, we do have estimates of per capita income for regions of the world that far back in time and even for some individual countries, thanks to the highly regarded Maddison Project, which builds on Angus Maddison's pioneering effort to measure economic development across the world from the time of the Roman Empire to the present.¹²

The Maddison Project's currently available data for much of the world only allow us to estimate regional per capita incomes for three time points between the approximate birth of Jesus and 1500: the years 1, 1000, and 1500. While the Maddison Project offers a smattering of estimates for a few modern-day European countries, with so few time periods it is not possible to form a nuanced understanding of what was happening *within* Europe over that first millennium. Against that limitation, these per capita income estimates exist not only for Europe but for the entire globe. Hence, we can compare Europe to the rest of the world to get a sense of how well—or how poorly—Europeans were doing at different times over the first one and a half millennia after Jesus. That comparison helps set the stage for examining the birth of Western

exceptionalism and how different that exceptionalism looks from our perspective compared to what it would have looked like to someone of a thousand years ago.

We should keep in mind as we pore over incomes from long ago that we are living in an extraordinarily prosperous time. Incomes, even after being adjusted for inflation, were vastly lower across the world between the years 1 and 1500 than they are almost everywhere today. Hence, we should not be surprised that the Maddison Project's estimates of average incomes look nothing like modern incomes except, perhaps, in a handful of miserably poor modern countries.

In the thousand years after Jesus, western European per capita income fell from about \$600 dollars to only about \$425, a drop of about 30 percent.¹³ Italy (or rather, the region now known as Italy) saw per capita income drop from about \$800 to \$450, a monumental, devastating fall of nearly 45 percent.¹⁴ Life, to borrow from the much later view of Thomas Hobbes, was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."¹⁵ Yet thanks to the success of the Roman Empire, western Europe had begun the millennium with a distinct advantage. At the dawn of Christianity, the average income in western Europe was thirty to fifty percent higher than in China, India, Africa, the Americas, and in what later became the Islamic world of the Middle East and North Africa. So Europe inherited a big boost in its conditions thanks to the Roman Empire, and it managed to lose that advantage over the long, slow years between Rome's demise around 476 and the dawning of the new millennium.¹⁶

Of course, big things were happening to Europeans between the years 1 and 1000. The demise of the rich and powerful Roman Empire gave rise to the Byzantine Empire, shifting wealth and power away from Rome and eastward to Constantinople. Christianity was born, oppressed, and then adopted by the Roman Empire as its official religion. That gave Christianity a leg up on the many competitor religions within the empire, and then, as proselytizing Christians spread Christianity's word across the European continent, the Catholic Church expanded its institutional advantage over rival

religions and locked in new patterns of family relations that strengthened the church's position as a competitor for spiritual and secular power, converting many and supporting the suppression of resisters.¹⁷ Then too, Christian Europe began to feel challenges as Islam came into existence in the Middle East and as its adherents worked assiduously to spread its word through proselytizing and through conquest. And the Holy Roman Empire was created in 800 to act as a substitute source of protection for Catholic western Europe, at the expense of the Byzantine Empire. As is so often true of those who are chosen to provide protection, the Holy Roman emperor, in rather short order, provided protection at a price. Over time, that price gradually became control over almost every member of the church's leadership. In short, there was a lot of political, religious, and economic churning during the first "Christian" millennium, and that churning was accompanied by widespread suffering from plagues, chaos, and economic hardship.

With the collapse of the Roman Empire, Europe lost its great source of social organization, political stability, and common identity. Times were clearly tough in Europe, but that does not mean that they were tougher in Europe than elsewhere. We can get a glimpse of whether life had become more difficult in Europe than in other parts of the world by putting Europe's economic record in a global context. This global comparison is limited by a lack of data, but there are a few tactics we can use to make do.¹⁸

Our first chart, [Figure 1.1](#), focuses attention on the four economically top-performing parts of the globe at the approximate time of the birth of Jesus. The figure looks at how four regions—western Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and China—were doing on per capita income in the years 1, 1000, and 1500 relative to the world average at the time, setting the world average as a baseline of 100.

This way of looking at the average person's income on a country-by-country or region-by-region basis gives us an easy way to compare relative incomes and also gives us an easy way to compare how different places were doing relative to the global average over

time. It produces some eye-opening views that may give us pause about beating our chests and bragging about how well western Europe, or any other part of the world, is doing right now. As the chart makes evident, looking across long stretches of time tells us that what we see and think today is not what we might have seen, let alone thought, long ago. It also demonstrates that regional or countrywide performance is neither inevitable nor fixed for all time. It makes us want to know whether the forces that got us where we are now have run their course or whether, as I said I would bet, those forces have created lasting success that the rest of the world might adopt and emulate.

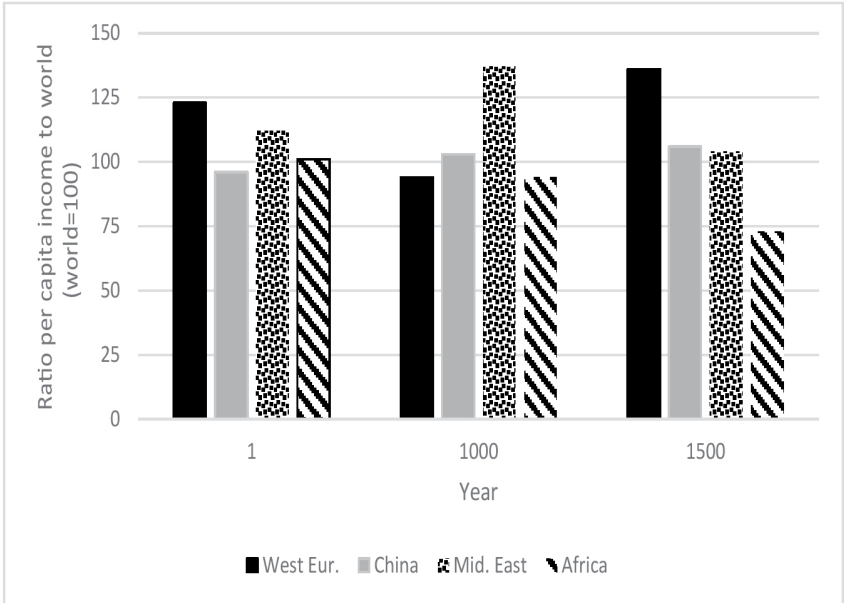


Figure 1.1: Per capita income: Top performers, years 1–1500. The figure divides the Maddison Project’s estimate of each region’s per capita income each year by the project’s estimate of global per capita income in the same year and then multiplies the result by 100. This sets the world’s average per capita income equal to 100 and then compares each part of the globe to that baseline. If a region or country scores, say, 110, then its per capita income averaged 10 percent more than the global average in the year in question. Conversely, if it scores 80, its per capita income was only 80 percent of the global average, suggesting a relatively poor material quality of life in that part of the world.

Among the notable trends here is the change in the fortunes of the Middle East. Per capita income there exceeded the global average by a whopping 37 percent in the year 1000. The people of China, in second place globally at that time, had a one-third lower income than the folks in the Middle East. At that moment, if anyone had a claim to exceptionalism, it was the people of the rising Islamic world. While the world's regional per capita incomes in 1000 ranged between \$400 and \$460, the Islamic world's per capita income was about \$560. And not only was the Islamic world's income on the rise, but so too was the range of territory it controlled. In the span of a few centuries, the adherents of Islam grew from a tiny minority to a dominant position in North Africa and established significant footholds in Europe. Neither China nor the Islamic world of the Middle East, however, managed to do great things as far as per capita income was concerned during the next five hundred years. They both hovered very slightly above global average income performance, meaning that the people of China had neither progressed nor regressed, relatively speaking, during that half millennium and that the Middle Eastern region, dominated by Islam well before 1500, had regressed mightily from its heady perch of five hundred years earlier. Europe, however, sprang way up.

Was Europe's recovery in 1500 a matter of chance? Were its people suddenly smarter or culturally or religiously superior? Or was something else going on? Was the Islamic Middle East's decline over those same five hundred years just a chance slip down? Was Africa's further descent about to be reversed or was that descent, as we know from our perspective today, part of that region's long decline into relative economic misery? And how about China? We know that China has experienced dramatic economic expansion over the past few decades. When placed in the context of the rest of the world, has it leapt forward?

[Figure 1.2](#) repeats the process that produced [Figure 1.1](#) for the year 2000, replacing Africa with Europe's Western settler offshoots (that is, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). They are the world's per capita income champions, and they help us fill in the picture of so-called Western exceptionalism. The figure for

the year 2000 helps us address the question of whether the western European economic record in 1500 was just a lucky bounce or whether something particular was going on, something that then spilled over onto Europe's settler colonies in the years and centuries to come.

[Figure 1.2](#) tells a startlingly different story from what we saw in [Figure 1.1](#). For the years from 1 to 1500, no part of the world had a per capita income of more than 140 percent of the global average. Indeed, if we take a look at all the regions of the world, we see surprisingly little variation in per capita income from place to place over the first 1500 years of the Common Era. Of course, there were huge differences in wealth between the rich and the poor, but that does not seem to have produced tremendous global disparities in average per capita income; wealth by region was pretty equally distributed. In a comparison of the whole world—divided into ten regions—the lowest per capita income score in year 1 was 86 relative to the baseline of 100, and this was the value for what are today's Western settler offshoots of Europe, the countries of Latin America, eastern Europe (those countries that were later part of the Soviet Union), and Japan (areas that are not shown on [Figure 1.1](#)). By 1000, the minimum value against the global 100 baseline was 88, attained by what are now the Western settler offshoots, eastern Europe (the states that were later in the Soviet Union), and the countries of Latin America. In 1500, inequality was a bit higher, with the worst performers scoring 71 (what are now the Western offshoots) and 73 (Africa), respectively.

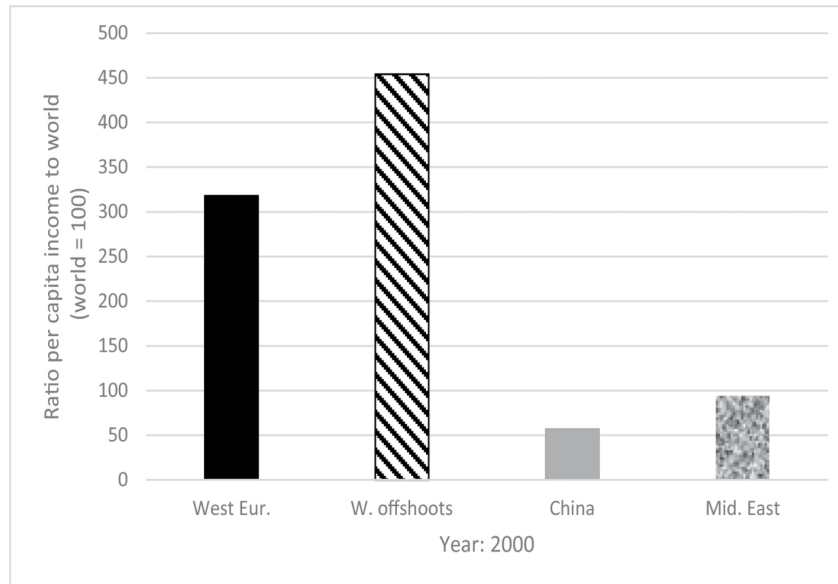


Figure 1.2: Per capita income: Select regions in 2000

Unlike the chart for years 1 to 1500, the graph for the year 2000 tells a story of enormous income inequality. [Figure 1.2](#) shows that, compared to the per capita income in the Western offshoots, which now is up to 450 percent of the global per capita income average, the rest of the world lags far behind. While Europe's Western offshoots were the top performers in 2000, western Europeans enjoyed a per capita income 3 times larger than the average person. The folks in the Middle East have about the same income as the global average, just as they did five hundred years ago. China, despite decades of rapid economic expansion, found itself in 2000 at a little over half the global average per capita income, much worse than was true for China in 1500 or 1000 or in the year 1. Even using World Bank per capita income data for 2019—the latest available at this writing—China's score is only 89, about 17 percent below its relative income position in 1500, when it scored 106. By 2000, the low score against the global 100-point baseline was 24 (Africa), 47 points worse than the worst performer in 1500. India, at 31 percent of the global average, was second worst, 40 points behind the worst performance by any place in 1500. China is third worst, and the states of the former Soviet Union are next worst at 74, a hair better than the worst-performing region of five hundred years ago. Seeing

the pattern in 2000 compared to that of, say, 1500, it is easy to understand how some, focused on correlation without careful thought about causation, would believe that the West is made up of superior beliefs and people. But a wider historical view quickly weakens the case for that view.

EUROPE'S UNIQUE FEATURE

Why Europe became distinct after the year 1000 and not before can be reduced to this surprisingly simple reason: in Europe, the head of religion and the head(s) of state were different people who faced off against one another in long-standing, long-lasting, intense competition for political control. Certainly, the rulers of China and Japan were thought to be gods. In the Mongolia of Genghis Khan (c. 1162–1227), the head of religion as late as 1207 was Genghis's competitor, the shaman Teb Tenggeri. Genghis solved the religious and political challenge to his authority by executing his rival and by tolerating, even encouraging, Nestorian Christianity, a religious movement that he understood would be subservient to him.¹⁹ The Mongol code of law, the Yassa, whose writing Genghis seems to have personally overseen, called for unquestioning obedience to the khan, thus making Genghis the supreme ruler, inferior to God but not inferior to any of God's agents on earth.

The Incas and the Mayas (the Aztecs being rather later than the period studied here) likewise had their priesthood, but either the priests were the rulers, as in the Inca tradition, in which the ruler was the son of the sun god, or the priests were subservient to the ruler. In the Mayan case, for instance, the priesthood was drawn from the nobility, whose interests they served. In none of these places were church and state on an equal footing competing with one another. In Europe as well, much of the higher clergy were drawn from the nobility, but for centuries the European clergy and European secular rulers were in a wrestling match for authority, whereas in the Maya world, the religious served the royal elite.

The rise first of the Roman Catholic Church and its pope and then the Holy Roman Empire and its emperor meant that the two swords of power in much of Europe, the one spiritual and the other secular, resided in different hands and were cast in a contest for dominance with one another. The dividing line that Jesus drew—“Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21)—lay overwhelmingly in favor of Caesar for as long as the Roman Empire survived. This remained true even as Christianity’s influence from the fourth century onward was much greater than it had been during its first three centuries. Despite its adoption as the imperial religion by the late fourth century, still the clergy of the newly named Catholic Church was unquestionably subservient to the emperor until there was no emperor any longer.

Then, certainly by the time of the Iconoclast Movement in the eighth century, the advantage began to swing away from the new Caesar of the day, the Byzantine emperor, moving toward the pope in Rome. Indeed, it is fair to say that for seven hundred years following the death of Constantine, until the rise of Holy Roman Emperor Henry III in 1046, Caesar’s portion of earthly power was mostly in retreat. But once Caesar, in the shape of Henry III, removed God’s agent, Pope Gregory VI, from his presumably God-given office, the question of what exactly to render unto any Caesar or king and what unto God or God’s vicars in the form of the pope, bishops, and priests was once more a fraught affair, one with enormous consequences for the future of the West.

The Catholic Church played a crucial part in the emergence of Western exceptionalism, but it was neither the church’s religious beliefs nor its own structure that deserves credit. The monarchies of Europe likewise played a crucial part, but it was not their governance style or their regard (or rather, disregard) for freedom that deserves credit. The credit goes to the competition between kings and popes, monarchies and the church, and monarchs and their subjects, not to any of them on their own. Thus, the story of Europe’s exceptionalism is a story of strategic triggers and competitive logic. It is, I believe, a logic that presents a compelling account that explains why Western

Europe, despite its poor showing 1000 years after Jesus, became so much richer and freer than most of the rest of the world.

CHAPTER 1: EXCEPTIONALISM

1. Quotations from the New Testament are from the King James Version. Quotations from the Old Testament are from *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1917; forty-first impression, September 1958). I include Western Europe and its settler offshoots in the term “West.” The claims for exceptionalism are readily supported by the ranking of nations on, for instance, the World Bank’s Development Indicators, the World Happiness Report, Freedom House’s country scores, Polity country scores, and many other widely respected sources.

2. Henrich, *The WEIRD People in the World*.

3. Rubin, *Rulers, Religion and Riches*.

4. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*.

5. A comparable agreement was reached by Pope Paschal II in 1107 with the kings of England and France. Those earlier deals differed from the Concordat of Worms in ways that are not important for the investigation conducted here. See, for instance, Sweeney and Chodorow, *Popes, Teachers, and Canon Law*, 14.

6. The per capita income values are from the World Bank Development Indicators, 2019, the most current year as of this writing. “GDP Per Capita (Current US\$),” World Bank Group, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>. Data for labor/leisure time are from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for 2018/2019. “Average Annual Hours Actually Worked per Worker,” OECD.Stat, <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=ANHRS>.

7. See Henrich, *The WEIRD People in the World*, for a more psychological, less strategic view.

8. Lopez, *The Birth of Europe*; Lopez, *Commercial Revolution*; Cantoni, Dittmar, and Yuchtman, “Religious Competition and Reallocation”; Weber *The Protestant Ethic*.

9. See Nick Pisa, “Oldest Image of St Paul Discovered,” *Telegraph*, June 28, 2009,

www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/vaticancityandholyse/5675461/Oldest-image-of-St-Paul-discovered.html, and Wikipedia, s.v. “Catacomb of St. Theresa,” accessed June 8, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catacomb_of_Saint_Thecla, for reports of the discovery of the fourth-century frescoes of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in the Catacomb of Saint Thecla.

[10](#). See Wikipedia, s.v. “Colossus of Constantine,” accessed June 8, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colossus_of_Constantine.

[11](#). For a sample of investigations into global historical developments, see, for instance, Toynbee, *A Study of History*; William McNeill, *The Rise of the West*; William McNeill, *The Global Condition*; Levi, *Of Rule and Revenue*; Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel*; Dincecco and Wang, “Violent Conflict and Political Development”; Stasavage, *The Decline and Rise of Democracy*.

[12](#). Bolt and van Zanden, “The Maddison Project.”

[13](#). See the Maddison Project, Maddison Project Database, releases of 2010, 2013, and 2018, Jutta Bolt, Robert Inklaar, Herman de Jong, and Jan Luiten van Zanden, available for download at www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison/releases. Income estimates are in inflation-adjusted, constant dollars, also often referred to as real dollars.

[14](#). All of Maddison’s 2010 data series on per capita income are adjusted for inflation and estimated based on 2005 dollars.

[15](#). Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 89.

[16](#). The difficulties that Europe experienced between the collapse of Rome in 476 and the start of the second millennium challenge many of the ideas in works by people like Stark, *How the West Won*, or Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

[17](#). Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*; Nixey, *The Darkening Age*.

[18](#). For a clever attempt at working through terms of marriage as a critical social and organizational factor across at least some parts of the medieval world outside of Christian Europe, see Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

[19](#). McLynn, *Genghis Khan*, 111.