I AM NOT EXCEPTIONAL

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Category: Observations

From my earliest days, I knew that I was special. This wasn't because of any particular virtue that I possessed, but because I had been fortunate enough to be born British, more specifically English.

I'm old enough to remember when the maps in our school atlases showed a large part of the globe coloured red; those were the countries of the British Empire, or as we were learning to call it the Commonwealth. We may no longer have controlled a large part of the world's population, but we were still the heads of a massive family of nations. True, our armed forces might be smaller than those of the upstart Americans, but we knew that ours were better.

We were assured of our morality, too, after all an Englishman's word is his bond because an Englishman is a gentleman. Of course, to act honestly and uprightly was to "play the white man".

This special status was reinforced through my Christian faith. Church history books drew a direct line from the Apostle Paul (never from Jesus, for some reason) to the Reformers and from them on to the English Puritans, through Wesley and Whitfield, to Spurgeon and on to my particular corner of Evangelicalism. Two thousand years of church history were all shaped to produce people like me.

A call to overseas mission obviously made sense; I had special privileges and I had a responsibility to pass them on so that other people could share them.

Looking back, the first cracks in this certainty began to emerge when I first attended a service at a small church in Normandy. I looked through the hymnbook, smugly expecting to see lots of translations of hymns that I knew. There were none, I was surprised to discover that the French had their own hymn-writers, they were not dependant on Wesley, Watts and Kendrick.

In the ensuing years, I have spent a lot of time outside of these islands and I've learned a lot more about the history and the present of the Christian church. I've come to realise that to be British is not to win some sort of moral lottery of life. We do have a somewhat peculiar history, but in the end, we are just another European nation, no better and no worse than the others. We might say that an Englishman's word is his bond, but the French speak of *l'Albion perfide.*

Yes, my Christian tradition has its strengths, but it has its weaknesses, too. I've learned a lot more from interactions with believers from around the globe than they ever learned from me. The history of the church is far richer, far more international and far more diverse than I had understood. Far from being a straight line from Palestine to Western Europe and beyond, there has been a web of

movements all of which have influenced each other. And if I have learned one lesson from history it is that far from being the pinnacle of church history, my tradition is just another branch in the long story of the faith. If the Lord does not return soon, new reformations and new revivals will come that will react to the blind spots that we don't even know we have and new traditions will emerge as we become a paragraph in the history books.

Don't get me wrong. I love my country. I love it with a passion that only someone who has lived away from it for a long period can know. But, I'd love my homeland just as much if I were German, Dutch or Bengali. I rejoice in my particular Christian tradition. I happen to think that it has strengths as well as suiting me temperamentally. However, this doesn't mean that I can't appreciate and learn from other branches of evangelicalism and the wider Christian church.

The church that Jesus is building is an amazing, multicoloured, multilingual, multi-cultural community. This was demonstrated on the day of Pentecost and it foreshadows the amazing day when people from every tribe, tongue and nation will gather to sing the praises of the lamb. I rejoice that there will be many Brits there, but we won't get front seats just because we happen to have lived on some windswept islands off the coast of Europe.

So, why am I writing this?

Partly, it is because I still see the sorts of attitudes that shaped me at work in the Christian and mission world. I still encounter visions of church history that present it as an evolutionary process all designed to produce Western conservative evangelicalism. I see calls to export our traditions, our contextualised versions of Christianity, to the rest of the world. The assumption is that what we have is the best, the purest form of the faith and we have nothing to learn from others. Lord deliver us from this arrogance.

However, my other motivation is that, like many others, I saw a mob in a capital city; some were armed, some carried national flags, at least one was wearing a *Camp Aschwitz* t-shirt, others set up a gallows and in the middle of this flew a flag claiming that Jesus Saves. It is not my intention to comment on the political issues at hand, nor to cast aspersions on the faith of the people carrying that flag, nor am I criticising America *per se* - many of the international Christians that I owe the most to, come from the States. However, when we allow Christianity to get tied up with nationalism (whichever nation we belong to) it takes us into some dark places because it denies the fundamental nature of Christ's church..

This is not who we are.

(OK, before anyone says it, I fully realise that it doesn't take nearly 1,000 words to demonstrate that I'm not exceptional!)