

WHAT CREATES SUCCESSFUL NATIONS?

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By Jim
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“For
righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.” Prov.
14:34 NKJV

In this
world of international chaos and suffering one thing stands out: Not all
nations are equal. Some have languished in financial and political doldrums for
centuries while other rise out of obscurity into success and world prominence.
Why?

MIT economist
Daron Asemoglu and Harvard political
scientist/economist James A. Robinson offer one explanation in their 2012 book
“Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty.” The book
runs 462 pages, so I will attempt to clarify and shorten for your consideration
their hypothesis that nations succeed to the extent that their political and
economic institutions foster growth and innovation by encouraging entrepreneurs
to accept risk in return for the promise of later financial return. These basic
institutions form during the early years of nationhood as leaders create what
the writers call either “extractive” or “inclusive” strategies for distributing
economic gains. Under extractive policies, greedy, dominant leaders use their
power to extract profits for themselves, with the result that little is left for
investment and incentive for technological development virtually disappears. Autocrats
fear change and so tend to influence their fledgling institutions toward
stability and control, thus minimizing the innovation and freedom necessary to
development. The final result is the development of public institutions based
upon extraction of wealth from lower to upper classes, leading to long-term economic
stagnation or decline.

Inclusive
institutions arise from early leaders being enlightened sufficiently to share
with their people the fruits of progress. They allow farmers and workers to
keep most of what they produce. They protect innovators and secure private
property against criminal depredation. They create a public attitude toward
justice and peace that morphs gradually into economic and political institutions
favorable to progress.

The authors

present many profound contrasts between nations, beginning with the glaring differences between Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora (Mexico). They are divided by the international border into cultures that appear to be similar but are institutionally vastly different. The difference is the effect of the extraction-oriented policies of Spanish conquerors in the development of Mexico's economic and political institutions, while U.S. institutions were born in struggle against such outside domination and an early emphasis on inclusion of the people in the governmental process.

The authors

agree that religion is generally unimportant in the development of nations. I heartily disagree! If the founders of nations had views and values favorable to development of institutions capable of fostering national growth and prosperity, then I think we must ask where these values came from. In the case of Western Europe, the United States, and Canada I think it safe to say that the basic values of our leaders came from the Bible and early Christian experience. So, far from being insignificant, it seems that religion (or the lack of it) is paramount in forming underlying values and attitudes toward compassion, truth, and justice. These are the values that created our Constitution, Bill of Rights, and economic and political institutions. They are also the values that built the greatest nation yet to appear on the screen of history.

God says

that "righteousness exalts a nation." Exactly what is righteousness? It's much more than the personal piety, doctrinal correctness, and sexual purity that many Christians use as a basis for their faith. Righteousness in the biblical sense means right relationships with God, our fellow humans, and the earth. Old Testament law sets forth the necessity for doing these things under threat of death, while Jesus came to transfer the motivation for obeying God's law from fear to love.

If our

nation, or any other for that matter, were to implement the God-given principles of biblical Jubilee (Lev. 25), we would initiate a reign of justice and righteousness upon the earth. These scriptural principles would come to pervade institutions of economics and politics, and would accomplish what the authors postulate: to rein in evil sources of power and oppression, create long-term world prosperity, and abolish poverty. They are on the right track, but they need to bring God into the mix.