

Christianity and the renaissance assignment



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

I read this article by David Warren on the “ clash of civilizations” which he claims is at the root of the conflict in the Middle East.

There is a lot going on in the Middle East, and I hesitate to categorize it as a war between “ Western Civilization” and Islam, or a war between Christianity/Judaism and Islam. Characterizations of this sort tend to paint the picture in entirely philosophical terms, and gloss over political and historical issues such as the creation of Israel and the fate of Palestine, which are quite relevant to the war.

However, this is not what I am interested in right now. In fact, I don't even want to talk about the Middle East and its wars.

Instead, I am writing about how Mr. Warren often conflates “ Western Civilization” and Christianity. He seems to use these two terms interchangeably, and apparently strongly believes that “ Western Civilization” owes its existence to Christianity. I strongly disagree.

Western Civilization is a somewhat nebulous concept. Most people use it to refer to the material prosperity, advanced science and technology, religious and political freedoms, and democratic societies that typify western countries today. Although many non-western countries have adopted these qualities (such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan), few would argue that they were pioneered by “ Western Civilization”, first in Europe and then in the US.

The question of how Western Civilization came to acquire these virtues is where I differ with Mr. Warren. His view is that these are Christian virtues, and are a direct result of the contribution of Christianity to Western

Civilization. My own view is that these are secular values, and came into being despite (and sometimes in opposition to) the Christian values and traditions of the time.

Western Civilization is rooted in the civilization of the ancient Greeks, to whom it owes both its virtues and vices. Most scholars agree on that, and for good reason.

One of the central tenets of Western Civilization concerns the material world. This principle is that the material world can be understood and explained in terms of natural processes, and is attributable to Aristotle. In his time, and possibly for much of the human experience in pre-history, the world was thought to be guided by supernatural forces, which were often capricious and perplexing. Explanations for events were couched in mystical terms, involving the whims and desires of gods. Solutions to problems were found in placating the gods, in trying not to annoy them.

Obviously, science cannot proceed from such beliefs. The contribution of the ancient Greeks was to suggest that natural phenomena had natural explanations; that these explanations could be discovered and grasped by the human mind, and therefore the natural world could be adapted and modified to serve the needs of man. This was the birth of science and technology.

Science and technology flourished in ancient Greece, as every child is reminded today when learning Pythagoras' Theorem, or the Principle of Archimedes. After the Greeks, the Romans continued the tradition, after a

fashion, for another few centuries. The Romans thought highly of Greek science and culture.

After the fall of Rome, much of this knowledge was lost in Europe, as it descended into almost a thousand years of mind-numbing superstition under the Catholic Church. I do not mean to imply that there were no individual achievements in this period. The human mind can, and does, often prevail against adversity and deep indoctrination. I mean that the tradition of scientific inquiry and scholarship as it existed under the Greeks (and later the Romans) was lost. We call this period the Dark Ages.

The re-discovery of Aristotle and other Greek and Roman texts from Arab sources directly preceded the Renaissance and the modern age. These texts stimulated minds to start thinking again, to search for non-divine explanations. It is worth remembering that the majority of the populace was illiterate at the time; therefore the rediscovery of Greek knowledge came first to the educated clergy. It is no surprise that among the earliest figures of the Renaissance were Christian clerics such as Thomas Aquinas, who did much to introduce Aristotle to the Christian Church and to scholars in general. But the methods of science and religion are quite different. Science looks for natural explanations, uses experimentation and reproducibility as criteria for acceptance. Religion looks for supernatural causes, and accepts revelation as truth. Clerics such as Aquinas or Gregor Mendel contributed to science only when they followed the scientific methodology.

The political freedom we take for granted in the West today also has secular roots. The Church did not hesitate to quell dissent any more than the kings

and emperors of the time. Galileo and Copernicus were persecuted for their beliefs; the Inquisition murdered countless people for heresy. For most of history, while the Church was powerful in political affairs, it was never wise or safe to contradict it.

Political freedom arrived despite the actions of the church and dictatorial rulers. The key was the rise of the middle class. The presence of a substantial number of people who were not constantly on the verge of starvation changed the political equations. These people demanded rights – the right to safeguard their livelihood, the right to not be arbitrarily judged and condemned by church or state, the right to pursue their own interests. Whenever and wherever living conditions have improved significantly for a large number of people, more freedom has followed. This was true after natural disasters, such as when the Black Death killed 1/3 of Europe's population, leaving the remainder to inherit their wealth. In recent times, this has been particularly true since the Industrial Revolution started to raise the standard of living. People who are not worried about starvation anymore start to take an interest in their future, and the future of their children. In the long run, freedom depends on having a majority of such people.