

Essay on distinctives of western culture

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



The origins of Western culture are actually near the border of what we now consider the edge of the region where its tenets and practices hold sway. In the sands of the Mediterranean Sea, where the ancient Greek and, later, Roman civilizations emerged, many of the basic values in Western civilization came into being. Using reason and logic as its bases, Western culture has developed into a corpus of knowledge that has grown into a small but consistent group of tenets, such as the placement of a high value on scientific progress, an attempt to permit free markets, and the ascendancy of the individual's desires over the needs of the collective group. In the twenty-first century, signs of Western culture are actually visible around the entire world. In previous centuries, before the advent of international media, particularly the presence of the Internet, cultural lines were more sharply drawn (Spielvogel 22). Indeed, even in modern times, some cultural regions have maintained sharp lines of division against Western ideals, such as the Middle East. Other areas, which used to remain behind geographical and political boundaries too inaccessible for Western culture to influence, are now more available; perhaps the most well-known example would be the fall of the Soviet Union, in which ideas of freedom and openness were considered expressions of treason; in many of the successor states, communication is much more open. While many countries are considered traditional sources of Western culture, other countries are starting to adapt their ways to meet some of the precepts found in the West. Primarily, Western culture is predominant in many countries in Western and Central Europe, but it is also a driving force in some countries in Asia, particularly Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan (Spielvogel 28).

Individualism is one of the elements that sets Western culture apart from non-Western belief systems. Other cultures focus on the good of the collective group over all; however, in the West, even back to the days of the ancient Greeks, the glory of the individual received far more attention than that of the group. The writings of the Greeks focus on the heroic deeds and the tragic flaws of individuals, not groups – consider the Iliad, which is far more a story about the selfishness of Agamemnon, the arrogance of Menelaus, the beauty of Helen, the stubbornness of Achilles and the desperation of Hector than it is about the masses of men moving against one another in war. Even our writing about history is based on individualism; James Burke's book and BBC program Connections is just one of many works that focus on individual contributions to turning points in history. For example, if Johann Gutenberg had not been initially trained as a goldsmith, he would not have known that, if you rub gold on a rock, it will leave a mark. He might not have later thought about transferring ink onto paper, and therefore might never have come up with the printing press (Burke 224). The Gutenberg press is widely recognized as having revolutionized not only communication but many aspects of the world at large, because being able to mass produce written forms of communication instead of copy everything over and over by hand meant that one could reach an unlimited audience for the first time.

An emphasis on reason is another distinctive of Western culture. Of course, reason hasn't always held sway, particularly between the days of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. One of the lower points of Western civilization with regard to reason most likely had to do with the way people dealt with

the Black Plague: instead of analyzing the various elements of their environments to find a cause, too many of the frightened Europeans decided that the pestilence was God's punishment. Walking around and whipping one another, trying to punish themselves before God could get around to it, these groups, called "flagellants," would literally try to bleed their way out of the Black Plague. However, because the disease was being carried on rats and fleas, this strategy was ineffective. In general, though, reason has served the West quite well. While there is room for both faith and reason in the same belief system, abandoning either side to focus on the other solely would be foolish. Reason has brought about advancements in every area from science to art to civic design to politics (Fleming 12).

You can't pass through a town in Europe without seeing the effect that the Bible had on the region in the years before 1945. Although church attendance has plummeted in recent years in Western Europe, just about every town of any size that was around in the years before 1800 has its own church that is the central architectural feature in the town. In those days, town planning did not focus on street patterns or residential traffic; instead, it focused on the church, and on worship. In most parts of the Western world, even in the years leading up to the Age of Reason, church taxes were collected just as vigorously (and perhaps even more so, with your soul's eternal fate on the line) as they are today by political entities.

The benefit was advances in architecture, designed to build structures to glorify God. The first major period was the Romanesque, that featured churches built along the "Latin cross" plan. From above (God's perspective),

the churches looked like a cross. The transept was the shorter arm and contained seating on both sides of the central area. The nave, the longer end of the uneven arm, was the place where most of the congregation would sit. Both the nave and the transept contained areas for triptychs with candles in front of them, so that the faithful could light candles for those who had passed on. In some churches, the Stations of the Cross were represented in these small areas (Stalley 87). The apse, behind the stage from the nave, was generally where the choir would sing. In the Romanesque era, the ceilings along both arms were round “ barrel” vaults, that looked like tunnels. Filippo Brunelleschi remains the most famous name in architecture from that time period; he designed the Cathedral of Santa Maria in Florence, Italy, and he etched the designs in the dramatic doorways that lead in and out of the building as well. In Florence, he also designed the Foundling Hospital. The scale of this orphanage was not nearly as grand as that of the cathedral, but the rounded arches along the portico indicate the rich heritage of the city. The doorways in these churches featured intricate etchings of religious scenes on metal, as well as beautiful paintings on the inside (Fleming 122). The Church was one of the primary sponsors of art during this time period, and so the churches and cathedrals of Europe provided the locale and the occasion for many of the great masterworks between the end of the Dark Ages and the nineteenth century. As architecture continued to develop, the heavy barrel vault was replaced by the lighter groin vaults of the Gothic period, which allowed for clerestory windows to bring more light into the churches (Toman 44). Because of the vital role that religion played in European society, artists wanted to provide

their very best to glorify God in the design and construction of churches, as well as in the sculptures and paintings that went inside. City planners placed the cathedral at the center of the city, second in glory perhaps only to the ruler's palace and, in some cases, even greater in glory.

The Bible and individualism combined to change the world in the West in ways that the rest of the world might not have dreamed possible. One of the reasons that so many British colonists headed across the Atlantic Ocean to live in the North American colonies was a weariness of religious persecution. After England's King Henry VIII left Catholicism behind and founded the Church of England, principally as a way to grant himself divorces in his fruitless search for a male heir, living in England became particularly dangerous for the pious – both for the Catholic and for the newly minted Anglican. The legal religion of the land would change, depending on who the king was. If the king were Catholic, then Anglicans would undergo persecution; if the king were Anglican, then the “ papists” of Catholicism were in jeopardy. As a result, several different breeds of religiosity took root in North America. The Puritans gathered in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, forming one of the most rigid theocratic forms of government in the history of Western civilization (Channing 46). There were severe moral codes that every citizen had to follow, and church attendance and tithing were mandatory. The colony next door, Rhode Island, was founded in the interest of complete religious freedom. Anyone could come and live in Rhode Island and worship (or not) as he felt led to. The colony of Maryland was founded as a Catholic domain, while Pennsylvania was established as a Quaker area (Brogan 18). Even though the United States would later be founded with the

notion of a complete separation of church and state, these different religious backgrounds significantly informed the ethical and behavioral patterns that people in each of these regions would form over time. Rhode Island would remain a bastion for free thinking and academic inquiry, but the rest of New England would recoil from the Puritan way of closely monitoring the behavior of others. While the New Englanders kept the hard work ethic that also drove their witch-hunting forebears, they developed a deeply seated sense of privacy, that each person's business was his own, and that to ask questions was rude. The idea of pacifism in Quaker life has a lot to do with this, as while people are very helpful in that part of the country, they are also very private. Many of the founding tenets for future states came from the religious underpinnings of the thirteen colonies (Wood 17).

One definition of religion is that it is our response to the events that happen to us, or to the collective set of experiences that define us. Despite the fact that reason, logic and individualism were crucial Western values even before the appearance of Jesus in history, those three tenets fused with the ideas of personal sacrifice and hopeful belief to create a culture that is, while not overtly Christian, situated to promote morals that are practicable and to give all faiths room to promote their beliefs. Some of the intersections of faith and belief have produced interesting results, such as St. Paul's sermon on the unknown god's altar in Athens – then, Paul argued that even the Athenians must recognize the God of the Israelites, because they built a statue to a deity that they did not know. In the early Renaissance, the Catholic Church stood firm on the notion that the earth was flat and the center of the universe, making humanity God's ultimate creation. Finding out from such

pioneers as Galileo and Copernicus that the planet was indeed round sent the Church into a frenzy, demanding recantations from the astronomers rather than showing a willingness to admit error.

It's not just faith and reason that have influenced Western culture, though. Specifically, the Christian religion shaped the vast majority of Western institutions, up until the point of the Protestant Reformation in 1517. The papacy had developed such power that its decrees held Europe's believers under its edicts; when the papacy turned out to be the source of deep-seated corruption throughout the entire Church, part of the seeds of rationalism were planted: if the Church really were a dedicated servant of God, why would forgiveness be for sale? Why would you be able to buy yourself a bishopric? These questions informed the protests behind the Reformation, and formed the rhetorical basis for the turn away from religion that began in the aftermath of the Reformation and, in many ways, continues in the present day. Because all people have strong responses to their experiences, there will always be religious institutions of some kind. Because the Christian faith is writ so large in the heritage of the West, the ethical, spiritual and emotional attachments will remain for centuries to come.

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