

Essay on world history

Religion



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1. Discuss the cultural connections and parallels between Classical Greece and the Hellenistic world and the Roman Empire in terms of art, literature, religion and philosophy.

The Eastern Roman Empire (later the Byzantine Empire), was Greek-speaking and Hellenistic in culture, and contained two-thirds of the population and some of the largest cities like Alexandria, Constantinople and Antioch. Politically, culturally and economically, it was the most important part of the Empire and survived until 1453, for nearly 1,000 years after the fall of the West. In pagan times before the 4th Century AD, all of the Roman gods were simply renamed versions of their Greek counterparts, with Zeus being called Jupiter in Latin, for example, and the Romans believed that their city was originally founded by Trojan refugees after that city was destroyed in the Bronze Age. In the ancient world, the Iliad and the Odyssey were the most familiar works, at least to the literate minority, and it is possible that even the Bible was influenced by them, with Jesus playing the role of King Odysseus and his disciples the frightened, confused and not terribly bright crew of his ship. Of course, the Jesus portrayed in the Gospel of Mark's is "more compassionate, powerful, noble, and inured to suffering" than the Greek warrior-king (McDonald, 2000, p. 6). After Constantine made Christianity the official state religion, Eastern Roman emperors like Justinian also regarded Constantinople as part of Western, Christian civilization and a continuation of the Roman Empire. His magnificent Hagia Sophia cathedral was a tribute to Greek skills in mathematics and architecture as well as "the culmination of a long tradition of grand, imperially sponsored buildings from the beginning of the Roman Empire" (Nelson, 2004, p. 1).

Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle had tremendous

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influence on Roman culture and philosophy, particularly in the Stoicism of emperors like Marcus Aurelius and the concepts of duty and virtue. Socrates was always an admirable character for the Romans, given that he was Stoic and self-controlled, capable of enduring cold, hunger and fatigue without complaint when others could not. In this respect, he is the model citizen-soldier of the Athenian or Roman republics, and later the Empire, selfless and courageous in battle and disdaining the idea of receiving any award or medal for bravery. For all these reasons, then, Socrates was the greatest example of virtue and philosophy, “ extending to the whole duty of a good and honorable man” (Gil, 1999, p. 64). Aristotle also denied that happiness (eudaimonia) was based on a life of physical pleasure and carnal gratification, including food, alcohol, sex, and accumulating money and material things. Far from it, although it probably seems satisfying enough for the great majority of humanity that happiness should be identified with a life of abundance of physical pleasure and the absence of pain. Ideally, at least, civic virtue meant doing and practicing justice with no thought of reward or fame. True happiness on this level would be to find pleasure in ethical and virtuous behavior as a member of human society and citizen of the state. Good citizens will get pleasure from a life of public service, a way of life in fact, at least for those who are not adept in metaphysics, theology and contemplation of God.

Early Christianity was also heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, although some Christians like Tertullian also blamed Gnostic ‘ heresy’ on the influence of Plato, Zeno and Stoicism, especially in their belief that Jesus had no physical body and the material world was inferior and evil. He noted that Paul had also warned about the dangers of Athenian influence on

Christianity, although ironically Tertullian was also condemned as a heretic (King, 2003, p. 33). All of this became the standard 'orthodox' Christian view of the Gnostics that has come down to the present, along with the idea that rejected the authority of the apostles and the bishops who claimed to be their successors. Augustine had also been educated in Greek philosophy, like most upper class Romans, although he later rejected it, along with the classical Greek interest in science, mathematics and the natural world. Indeed, one common trend of the later Roman Empire was this retreat into mysticism and spirituality in the face of military, political and economic decline. Science in the modern sense did not exist for Augustine, nor were the events of the material universe and the physical-temporal bodies located within it of any great importance to him. Like the Stoics, though, he rejected the pride, lust and vanity of the material world, including the pride that philosophers took on their wisdom and learning, in favor of following the example of Christ (10. 42). Human beings were still crude, carnal and limited creatures, who concentrated on the "visible works of God" rather than their Creator (12. 24), but Augustine's duty as a Christian bishop was to direct their thoughts, emotions and desires away from physicality to the "divine mysteries that are cloaked in human language" (Wills, 2011, p. 121).

2) Describe and analyze continuity and change in Chinese philosophy, politics, economics and society from the Qin Dynasty through the Han Dynasty.

The Han Dynasty came to power in 206 BC after the collapse of the short-lived Qin Dynasty, which had been the first to unify the nation after the Warring States period. Lasting for four centuries, it was a period of economic, scientific and military success in which the autonomous kingdoms and

provinces were subjugated to centralized control. During this time, Confucianism also became the dominant philosophy of the state, and the system was presided over by an emperor, aristocrats and scholar-bureaucrats who had passed the government examinations. This system remained in place until the 20th Century, despite subsequent changes in dynasties. One of the classic works that is familiar in the West today was *The Art of War* by Sun Wu (Sun Tzu), which became part of the official scholarly canon during the Han Dynasty. Sun Wu was also a Confucian philosopher in his own right, and the politics, culture and economics of warfare was his major area of study, and the 'Tzu' was actually an honorific title that meant Master or Philosopher. In his own way, he should be considered a cultural anthropologist or sociologist who firmly insisted that knowledge of one's own society as well as those of allies as enemies was one of the key elements to success in warfare. As a Confucian, he actually regarded warfare as an evil that should be prevented if possible and then won very quickly if it could not be avoided.

Chinese philosophy took a highly pragmatic and materialistic view toward warfare, as indeed it did to other aspects of politics, government and society. War is a "cultural performance" in the anthropological sense that is "routinely accompanied by equally unique forms of cultural discourse" concerning why societies wage wars, what means they use and what their goals are, and Sun Tzu always had "delicately nuanced and understated views on precisely these questions in *The Art of War*" (Lucas, 2009, p. 38). He could even be considered an anthropologist in his own right, as well as a historian and sociologist, since he placed great value on intelligence and asserted that "it is as important to know yourself—and by extension your

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allies—as to know your enemies” (Banton 2004). Warfare was a regular “topic of philosophic reflection in China that is not paralleled in Western philosophical literature”, although within the Confucian context it was always regarded as evil and a last resort (Carr, 2000, p. 31).

In warfare and in every other aspect of life, Chinese culture and philosophy put the highest value on harmony (he) between all elements and components. Unlike Christianity or the Greek Platonists, it started with the assumption “there is only one continuous concrete world that is the source and locus of all our experience” (Carr, p. 37). No causes or ordering principles existed outside this known world, which was itself a living, organic and self-sustaining whole, which could be mastered and organized with the proper skill and knowledge. No isolated or independent individuals existed outside of their proper and harmonious roles and relationships, such as fathers and sons or older brothers and younger brothers. None of these were equal to each other but existed as part of a hierarchy, and even in nature and the material world “one thing is associated with another by virtue of contrastive and hierarchical relations that sets it off from other things” (Carr, p. 39). Thus the overall context of the philosophy of Sun Tzu or Confucius differed greatly from the Western philosophical tradition and cannot be simply or easily separated from its cultural and historical context. Sun Tzu insisted that the best rulers and military commanders should have all the Confucian virtues of patience, wisdom, loyalty, integrity, courage and discipline. As an ideal, Confucianism also became the main military and governmental philosophy of Japan, Korea and Indochina, and indeed the central organizing principle of society and the extended family as a whole. It was authoritarian, disciplined and hierarchical, and had no concept of the

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equality of rights and duties or of individualism. Indeed, the latter concept was considered synonymous with egotism, greed and selfishness, rather than the positive good that it became in Western philosophy. A Confucian ruler was selfless and self-sacrificing rather than greedy, selfish or corrupt, harmonizing himself with his duty to the family and the state.

3. Compare and contrast Hinduism and Buddhism with regard to their belief systems, visions of afterlife and the roles of gods and priests.

Hinduism was based on an authoritarian caste system, with the elite Brahmins as the scholars and rulers, followed by the military-aristocratic caste, then merchants and peasants, with slaves and untouchables at the bottom of society. Due to the law of karma and return, each individual inherited a certain status due to their good or evil deeds in past lives, while Buddhism offered a path of escape from this endless cycle of death and rebirth. According to the Hindu Vedas, the universe began with the sacrifice of the god Purusa (Man) whose body created space, the stars, living things, and the four Hindu castes. He had 1, 000 heads, 1, 000 eyes and “ pervaded the earth on all sides and extended beyond it as far as ten fingers” (World Religions, 2009, p. 12). Birds and animals were created from his body as were languages, music and poetry. From his mouth came the Brahmin or priestly caste, while the Warriors came from his arms, peasants from his thighs and slaves from his feet. Then his mind made the moon, the sun came from his eyes and space from his navel.

Other Vedic poets speculated about what existed before the creation of the universe and the gods, and that originally there was neither nonexistence nor existencethere was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is

beyond” (World Religions, p. 21). Unlike the Jewish and Christian tradition, there was no Creator or God in this void, and no night or day existed or even the lower gods. This poem does refer to some kind of life force that had a thought or desire, which led to seeds, powers and impulses, although the writer conceded that no one really knew the answers to these ultimate cosmological questions. The Vedas sometimes refer to this force as Reality that is “ beyond human understanding, ceaselessly creating and sustaining, encompassing all time, space, and causation” (Fisher, 1997, p. 74).

Such abstract ideas seem to shade off into Buddhism, which also has no Creator or act of creation, and considers the material world and the physical universe as imperfect and temporary. In Buddhism, even the self is an illusion, while Nirvana is the negation of the self and the physical, and it was “ not caused, established, arisen, supported” (World Religions, p. 94).

Nirvana was not physical or material, not this world or any other, but was “ unmade, uncreated, unconditioned” (World Religions, p. 95). Here again, unlike Judaism and Christianity, Buddhism has no personal God or Creator, and the main goal of life is to escape the cycle of birth and death and return to this blissful, primordial state. Buddha achieved true enlightenment while sitting under the sacred Bodhi tree of wisdom, and he vowed to remain there until he died to find the truth. After being tempted and attacked by armies of demons, he learned about his previous incarnations and the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. He then discovered the Four Noble Truths that suffering was universal, but also that it could be overcome by the Noble Eightfold Path of right views, right intentions, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (Fisher, p. 126). He also learned that Buddha-hood existed in all living things and that

anyone can become like him. Buddha was then given the choice of entering Nirvana at once or remaining on earth to teach Enlightenment and he chose to remain. For the next 45 years, he travelled around India, spreading the teaching of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. He advised his followers to avoid the extremes of hedonism and asceticism, and follow the middle path of knowledge and illumination (Fisher, p. 133).

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