

WESTERN CULTURAL DICHOTOMY: GREACO-ROMAN HERITAGE CHALLENGES TO MODERN WESTERN VALUES



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Theme of the Article: Religion

Research Objectives: Generically summarize an overview of the building blocks of Western values through the movement of empire and especially cultural legacy.

BIO

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ing efficiency and innovation. Beyond his career, Paul actively participates in leadership and ministry roles within various communities, reflecting a holistic approach to life and work

Abstract

The big picture. This presentation summarizes research tracing the evolution of some of the values Western culture has inherited through the complex interplay of Hellenism, Roman assimilation, the decline of the Roman Empire, and the emergence of Christianity from within. The global expansion of Western influence through colonialism created what we call today

'The West'. It highlights the persistent tension within Western culture, which, now rooted in Christianity, has absorbed and romanticized Greco-Roman influences while inherently possessing conflicting core values. The juxtaposition of Judeo-Christian values with the lingering echoes of Greco-Roman culture generates an enduring internal dilemma, subtly shaping and confusing the fabric of contemporary Western societies. The cultural trichotomy, often masked by modern entertainment's repackaging of ancient mythologies, remains a nuanced and unresolved undercurrent in the Western mindset.

In this paper, I will gener-

ically summarize an overview of the building blocks of Western values through the movement of empire and especially cultural legacy. Going forward, the great movements of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment continued to romanticise the ancient legacy as academic and historical resources allowed deeper study, debate and appreciation of the ancient cultures of the west. I will complete the paper with a short series of examples of contradicting values inherent simultaneously in the western mind.

Key words:

Values, Hellenism, Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, Western Culture

1.0 Introduction

The original title of this article used the word dichotomy. The Merriam-Webster definition: a division into two especially mutually exclusive and contradictory groups or entities. In this case we have three mutually exclusive and contradictory cultures merged together over time in the modern western culture.

First let's define culture.

It's not civilization.

Civilizations rise and fall. Culture is the fabric of society, the fabric of civilizations, which may survive long after the political, economic, or military structure is gone. The flow of history is not fixed in time or place. Cultures are fluid, unlike social and political structures and move through time and space (by space I mean geography). Most of the time religion is tied to culture as well. Values tend to have either religious or philosophical roots or both mixed together.

Values are trickier to define. The dictionary takes the pragmatic route and defines numerical values or price associated with goods and services. Google gave me what I was looking for:

"Values are the beliefs and principles that you believe are important in the way that you live and work. They (should) determine your priorities, and guide your decisions and the way you act toward others. When the things that you do and the way that you behave match your values, life is usually good." Values are actionable. Values should not be confused with ethics. Ethics are moral constructs often communicated as virtues. Virtues are defined as the quality

of doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong or moral excellence (definitions by Oxford Dictionary). Virtues are often defined by the culture or religion we live in.

Before I begin, the modern West is not Greek or Roman. Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome are a legacy. In this respect, the ancient institutional church is also a legacy in this post-Christian era. Every age perceives itself to be modern and, as the centuries go by, see the past in the rear-view mirror, categorized and defined by retrospect. We may repeat the mistakes of the past but we cannot relive the past because the culture of the past is fluid and gone down the river of time. As one culture touches another it creates ripples and even the viscosity of the culture may change. What does endure from each culture is values. The legacies of modern Western culture provide roots for three primary values.

1.1 Ancient Building Blocks of Western Culture

I've chosen to list the historical pivotal dates here because we are discuss-

ing a cultural process and although these dates are significant milestones in that process, they do not define it:

331 BCE Alexander the Great conquers Persia

146 BCE the Romans conquer Greece

63 BCE the Romans come to Israel as peace-keepers

27 BCE the Roman Republic ends, the Roman Empire begins

~33 CE the birth of Christianity

324 CE Constantine the Great retakes the Eastern Roman empire, establishes Byzantium as the new capitol, and decriminalizes Christianity

476 CE official fall of the Western Roman empire (536AD famine)

1453 CE the fall of Constantinople (Byzantium) to the Ottomans

The Germanic invasions of the Roman empire did not change the legacy of the ancient cultures and at times enhanced it. Those cultural legacies are very much alive but adopted and buried or visible in festivals and celebrations related to the ancient cultures. The influences are not based on values but on adoption or modification

of what already existed. The German influence was much stronger in the Reformation which is not the topic of this paper.

Hypothetically, imagine someone you know has damaged your reputation. What do you do? Find some way to get back at them to set the record straight? Look for justice or restitution by law in court? Pray for divine intervention and resolution – beginning with forgiveness? There you have it – Ancient Greek, Roman, and Christian approaches. The western mind will consider all three choices and choose one. This is not a strong example but its simplicity serves to illustrate the point. Although modern Western society is rules based; as individuals we are not all necessarily taught the same rules.

Today we live far removed from our Greek and Roman heritage by hundreds and even thousands of years. Yet in the modern western mind ancient Rome still looms large. It's a kind of cultural nostalgia, maybe even a romance with the past. As with many romances we are blinded by our affection and selective memory

However, in the course of

the rise and disintegration of the Roman empire, another empire rose from within, whose ethics and values were contradictory to classic Rome, the institution of the Christian church. The church politically and culturally grew stronger as the Roman empire faded. Long before that, Rome had already been infused with another foreign culture, the Greeks; what historians call Hellenism.

Together these three empires constitute or infuse the western cultures of Europe which was exported around the world during colonialism. Outside of the western genre, Greece and Rome and even Christendom have more of an academic interest the way a western culture would look at ancient Egypt or the Aztecs. They are unique and fascinating as history but not legacy.

Our modern western cultures incorporate the influences and values of Ancient Greek, Roman, and Christian cultures. The roots of these cultures are blended together like strands of rope but also create contradictions in western thought and values. However, add to this

what we call the modern age; with the influence of the industrial revolution, the application of science as we know it today, modern democracy, the influence of 'modern' philosophers (rationalism, empiricism, political models, idealism, existentialism, pragmatism, analytic philosophy) all who have built upon or argued with the philosophical originators of mostly Greek philosophers. Also today we are influenced by capitalism, the social sciences, modern medicine, and proper astronomy. The list is long. These are all post-Christian era influences.

This seems like a big topic but I'm hoping to narrow it down.

1.1.1 The ebb and flow of three cultures, the linear approach

The first great influence on the modern western values were the Greeks. However, their initial impact was not in the west but the east. It is well known that Macedonian general Alexander the Great consolidated the Greek states under his leadership and pursued his arch-rival – the ancient Persians. Being somewhat ambitious he

took Egypt and the Middle East along the way. His ambition did not stop at Babylon and he stretched the empire all the way to India. The Macedonian empire lasted only for his lifetime. When he died, the empire was divided into four parts by his four most powerful generals. So politically, militarily, and economically the empire did not endure. What did endure was Greek culture and its influence throughout the region.

Greece was called Helle at the time. The military called themselves Hellenic. The culture was labelled Hellenism. Concerning the impact of Hellenism, think of the prevalence of American culture around the world today. Think of both the acceptance and resistance to that culture. Now the Hellenist culture in the Middle East sustained two cultural blows – first the Romans and then the Ottomans. The Ottomans represented a completely different set of values and religion so other than the resilience of Greek architecture the rest is gone east of the Hellespont.

At the time, most cultures kept their spoken language but learned

Greek too. Greek became the common language of commerce and literature. However, as most cultures within the realm of Greek influence adopted what the Greeks brought with them; in particular a common language for science, commerce and diplomacy. The common written language became Koiné Greek. Many of the ancient written languages under Hellenism faded over time. This is much like English is today; the common language of commerce and science but does not necessarily erase the language heritage of the regions if they are strong enough.

One exception stands out: Israel. Alexander swept through the Middle East around 332 BCE. The last entry of the Canonized Old Testament came shortly after. What Alexander left in his wake was Hellenism. Israel is a passionately monotheistic and survivalist state made up of Judah, Benjamin, and Samaria. Israel had survived with its cultural identity intact in spite of the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and now the Macedonians. The continuing Hellenization of Judea pitted traditional

Jews against those who eagerly Hellenized. The latter felt that the former's orthodoxy held them back. Hellenism was their version of modernism. Jews were divided between those favoring Hellenization and those opposing it. The New Testament reflects the survivalist nature of the Jewish culture and clearly shows the religious opposed to Hellenism. The rejection of Hellenism carried into early Christian culture. However, the language of many Hebrews was Aramaic and the written language of Kione Greek was adopted. In fact, Jewish scholars at Alexandria were translating the Jewish scriptures into Greek at the time; the Septuagint.

2.0 Classical Greek Culture (Khan Academy)

- The Greeks made important contributions to philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. Literature and theatre were an important aspect of Greek culture and still influences modern drama (comedy and tragedy) today.
- The Greeks were known for their sophisticated sculpture and

architecture and the Greek culture influenced the Roman Empire heavily. It continues to influence modern cultures today.

- Greeks were also known for family values and close-knit community and for their polytheistic world-view – a great deal of individualism. A thoughtful reading of Greek mythology reveals a constant interplay between the gods and individuals which translates into the life journey of the individual. It was a combination of pleasing the gods as best one can and avoiding being embroiled in the squabbles of the Olympians.

- Greek loyalties were to the city state first. Greek citizens had equality among themselves and most city states had developed variations of democracy. The culture was homogeneous and interacted with other cultures through trade.

- As mentioned, the Greeks were known for their pantheon of gods. A dysfunctional family of superbeings reflecting the short comings of their worshippers. An entertaining mythology still enjoyed today. Mythology was cen-

tral to Greek culture, the gods were the honoured, and there was no separation of religion and state.

- Later the Greek philosophers began to develop the role of reason and inquiry, stretching the perception of reality past the superstitions about the Olympic gods.

- Finally athleticism was venerated and is still celebrated globally in the Olympics today.

Enter the Romans. The Roman Empire overran Greece in 146BC. Greece was overcome at the battle of Corinth in 146BC and Macedonia two years earlier. The conflict between the Hellenistic and survivalist Jews erupted into civil war a generation before the birth of Christ and the Romans were invited into Israel by its rulers as peace-keepers. The Romans were rapidly absorbing the ancient Greek empire and like the Greeks, were once again focused on challenges from Persia (now Parthia). The Jewish province was now resisting two cultures – Hellenism and Romanism. Figure 1: Roman Empire at its geographic peak 117BC



Figure 1: Roman Empire at its geographic peak 117BC

Greece continued to prosper under Rome. Romans began to adopt Hellenism and ultimately integrated the Greek pantheon into their own. At the same time, Hellenism was spread through the empire by infusing the Roman culture with Greek teachers, the arts, architecture, philosophy, accounting, etc. So Greek Hellenism now moved to the west. Ultimately Roman values and Greek values coexisted throughout the Roman empire.

2.1 Roman Culture

Romanism was pragmatic, heavily meritocratic and accomplishment oriented. Everything served the empire. The empire oper-

ated under the assumption that expanding its boundaries and subjugating the peoples on the periphery was the formula for peace and prosperity inside the empire. The Romans saw everything as a contest of dominance. They thought that in every relationship there was a dominant and submissive party. The Romans were also patriarchal beyond any degree we understand today. Family was a central institution but the pater familias held absolute control over family matters.

- Citizenship - loyalty to the republic and later the empire. As time went on the empire was not a homogeneous society but very cosmopolitan. As peo-

ples were conquered and Romanized, many made their way to Rome itself either in bondage or as emissaries.

- Democracy – it was partially applied in the republic, it was class based, it disintegrated with the rise of the empire and emperors

- Athleticism – participated in the Olympics, otherwise competition was a spectator sport in the arena.

- Justice – Roman law was supreme and brutally enforced, it was codified under Justinian (Constantinople) 100 years after the Western Roman Empire was gone. It is still the foundation of law in Western culture today.

- Aesthetics – beauty, art, architecture, theatre – influenced heavily by the ancient Greek culture but Rome had some scholars of its own. Literature and theatre mostly influenced by the Greek culture.

- The Roman sculpture and architecture was influenced by the Greeks but was raised to new heights through innovation and economic

power. In this case the Greek arts were very much Romanized because Rome used cement and could build much grander.

- Education - Sciences and Math – imported from the Greek and continued to evolve

- Innovation and Invention – Romans did not trust change, BUT as the empire expanded were willing to adopt what they needed to be successful and to defeat or govern other cultures than their own. One major contribution was the invention of cement/concrete.

- Slavery and Serfdom – on a much grander scale than the ancient Greeks, Rome's economy depended on it to afford the luxuries of the upper classes, the cost of their cities and the support of far-flung legions expanding the Empire. How many slaves owned was also a status symbol.

- All military and cities were also subsidized by taxes or tributes. Marcus Aurelius granted Roman citizenship to all male residents of the empire to

maximize the tax base. The empire was not a homogeneous society but very cosmopolitan. As peoples were conquered and Romanized, many made their way to Rome itself either in bondage or as emissaries.

2.2 Greek Religious Values

Religion and mythology were mixed together. The mythology explained the gods and heroes of the culture and provided life lessons and some moral code to the hearer. There was no separation of body and soul. There was no orthodoxy or dogma of a personal relationship to the gods and the afterlife was shadows. The ancient Greek was an opportunist with the gods. He chose to worship whichever god he thought would help him advance his cause or help him overcome an obstacle. The city state also had their own patron gods. There was no dispute with the gods of surrounding nations.

2.3 Roman Religious Values

Religion and mythology were more hierarchical. That said, there was a greater acknowledgement of their family ancestors. The mythology explained the gods and heroes of the culture and provided life lessons and some moral code to the hearer. There was no orthodoxy or dogma of a personal relationship to the gods and the afterlife was shadows or nothing at all. The gods of Rome were more formal as overseers and not so much as intervenors. Romans honored the gods to keep them on side. Romans expected the gods to be on their side; it was transactional. Each family had its own shrine to a particular god or goddess. The god of the empire was Jupiter (Zeus). There were other favorites depending on the times, place and the needs of the population. Gods of other nations simply accepted in their context or were Romanized.

2.4 Christian Culture

The flow of history and cultures continues. Picking up the thread from the Roman occupation and eventual destruction of the province of Israel, Jews and Christians became a diaspora throughout the empire. They were mutually exclusive communities except for the survivalist heritage born of the same monotheistic faith of the God of Abraham. The Jews were a diaspora successful in business, commerce, and crafts. From the Maccabean period Rome had agreed to tolerate Jewish religion as long as they didn't interfere with Roman law and administration. The Jews were not a threat to the polytheism of the Roman empire and could be tolerated because they were isolationist. Of course, we know that didn't last.

However, Christians were also spreading through the empire through proselytization. Christians openly opposed and interfered with the Roman polytheism, especially once the emperors started to declare themselves gods. Notably this is right on the heels of the partial Hellenization of Roman culture. During the same time Latin was becoming the lan-

guage of administration, law and literature throughout the empire. There was a lot of movement of culture, language, and religion during this time.

Skipping past all of the martyrdom and bloodshed of the early empire, in 313AD Emperor Constantine (the Great) was pivotal in decriminalizing Christian worship. He also epitomized the unity of church and state. Having effectively moved the center of the empire from Rome to Constantinople, the road was paved for the Bishop of Rome to grow in power. Over the next 200 years the mantle of power in the West would shift from the Roman emperor to the Roman Pope. The last western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustus, would be deposed by the Germanic Arian leader, Odoacer, in 476AD and Pope Simplicius forged a cooperative relationship with the newly proclaimed Germanic king of Italy. The church became a consolidating force in Eastern Rome because the emperor was also the head of the church starting with Constantine himself. The Church of Constantinople evolved into the Greek speaking Eastern Orthodox Church. Hellenism had moved east again. The

West soon was disintegrating into competing Germanic kingdoms and the church was becoming the unifying force in the West as Roman institutions crumbled due to invasion, economic collapse, and disease. The church of Rome became the new empire superimposed on the European geography and its governance was imperial, similar to the model from the Roman empire, and Latin was entrenched in the liturgy and business of the church.

Institutional church aside, the Christian religion, now the state religion, continued to spread through governance and evangelism. The Roman empire became a nostalgic notion of the past.

2.5 Christian Social Values

Social core values:

- Citizenship-in the kingdom of God, love one another
- render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, at this point rulership was local kings
- Democracy – only in some instances after the Reformation. The Reformation and the movement to consolidate the multitude of European kingdoms went hand in hand
- Athleticism – a community

activity, no Olympic vision

Justice – Roman laws are the codified root of Western Justice but Christians view justice in the hands of God and focus on forgiveness as a first step

Aesthetics – still Greek until recent modern arts decoupled from the past

Education - Sciences and Math and Literature – the Enlightenment broke the arts and sciences free of constraints from the church, until then education was only in the domain of the clerics

Innovation and Invention – in modern Western culture it is a way of life

Slavery and Serfdom – it took awhile because scripture takes a neutral stand on the subject, but over time Christian principle banned them both but embraced capitalism

2.6 Christian Religious values

Religion and culture are mixed together and monotheistic by definition. There shall be no other God before me. (Exodus 20 vs 3). The One God is represented on earth by the Church and described as

soul and spirit – although poorly defined and open to discussion. The Christian can bypass the metaphysical for a pragmatic faith in God. The Christian prays for providence, blessing, and deliverance.

The institutional church depends on orthodoxy and dogma to preserve established truths but the individual relationship with God depends on faith and experience of each person.

3.0 Summary of the Western Culture – simplified

The Romanized Church dominated what we refer to as the middle ages. In the early 5th century (the 400s) St. Jerome translated the scriptures from Greek to Latin, known as the Vulgate. Pope Gregory 590AD organized missionaries to evangelize Europe and England. St. Augustine of Hippo reintroduced the Greek philosophers into the scholarship of the church with a preference for Platonism. Hellenism is back in the West.

The 15th and 16th centuries saw the reintroduction of classic Greek philosophy and with it, humanism. The Renaissance loosened the romance of Ancient Rome and launched a renewed

interest in all things Greek. So academically Latin and Greek were proceeding together. In 1517 Luther posted the Ninety-five Theses initiating the first serious crack in the Roman church rule. He and other reformers launched the Protestant Reformation dividing the Christian empire and an alternative to the Romanized church and introducing dramatic geo-political change. The liberation of knowledge led to innovation, and invention and exploration. This opened up the period of colonialism which began exporting European culture (western culture) around the world, nowhere more complete than the Americas, the Caribbean, and Australia/New Zealand. As colonialism continued a new phenomenon overcame

Europe and its colonies. The age of Enlightenment is dated as 1685 to 1815. Once again, all things ancient became of interest in the age of reason. The Classic philosophers were thoroughly investigated and Greek philosophy moved West again. All things ancient became popularized outside of the academic milieu. The scientific and medical language still uses Greek and

Latin words for descriptive annotations and definitions and some law.

3.1 Illustrations of the Trichotomy of Western Values

Ambition

Ambition is a strong desire to do or to achieve something, typically requiring determination and hard work. (Oxford Dictionary) "Ixion was a figure in Greek Mythology known for his hubris, or excessive pride. Ambition, and defiance" (Sullivan (2023) Ixion in Greek Mythology) It was mythology which defined the Greek mind-set. Quoting Aristotle: "It seems that ambition makes most people wish to be loved rather than to love others. The truth is that men's ambition and their desire to make money are among the most frequent causes of deliberate acts of injustice." (Note: The attitude toward money in Sparta was an exception).

As with today, ambition is often associated with the successful or the aristocracy. Therefore, there existed both a negative and positive view of ambition. Greek history is poorly documented and focuses on the aristocracy. Home was where the heart was for the Greek freeman,

whether that be city state or his agrarian property. Wars were usually fought until harvest season and the ambition was to go home. It ultimately came down to a form individualism serving the civic good.

Roman: The core ambition to excel as a collective whole, strive for a better tomorrow. The ambitions were to serve the empire. If you disagreed with the empire, then your ambition was to stay alive. Making money was also more important than for the Greeks. Of course, the aristocracy was usually an exception above the rule. Today's modern version is patriotism.

Christian values are explicit in their scripture:

"Make it your business to live a quiet life, to mind your own business." 1

Thess 4:11

Philippians 2:3 "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit"

Galatians: "If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ."

3.2 Ascetism

Ascetic as a noun is defines as "a person who dedicates his or her life to a pursuit of contemplative ideals

and practices, extreme self denial usually for religious reasons". (Definition from Oxford Languages) As an adjective, ascetic means "the doctrine that one can reach a high spiritual state through the practice of extreme self denial". 'Ascetic' originates from the ancient Greek term askesis, which means training or exercise". The modern use of the word simplifies to doing without, self-denial.

Greek: In particular the Spartans have been presented to us by historians such as Plutarch as pragmatic, militaristic, and frugal. The storied nature of this city state attracted the Romans because its values seemed to mirror their own. Roman soldiers and bureaucrats occupying foreign lands valued military fitness, service to the state, equality of citizenship, and austerity. The focus of this comparison is austerity. The modern-day version is perseverance, resilience, and determination. Unlike the Romans, the Spartans avoided wealth and money.

Roman: Romans respected the Spartans but there was a more powerful form of ascetism in Roman culture - Stoicism. For the Romans Stoicism origi-

nated in Athens but was borrowed from further east by the philosopher Zeno. Being stoic is being calm and almost without emotion. Stoics mute their feelings and accept whatever is happening. Today, the noun Stoic refers to a person who seems emotionless and almost blank. Mr. Spock on Star Trek characterizes this trait. Emotional outburst, positive or negative, is not being Stoic. Values of the modern Stoic is not about things but living virtuously, making reasoned choices, acting for the common good.

The great philosopher Emperor Marcus Aurelius was a disciple and sponsor of Stoicism. The weakness of Roman Stoicism was that all gods were seen as part of the natural order of things. The concept of only one god was sacrilege to stoics. Thus, Stoicism encouraged persecution of the growing Christian phenomena.

Christian: Asceticism is the

practise of the denial of physical or psychological desires to attain a spiritual purpose or goal. Hardly any religion has been without elements of asceticism.

For Christian culture, asceticism relates to the body, mind, and soul. Christian asceticism is the practice of self-denial (i.e., control of one's passions and base impulses) to overcome our fallen nature with the help and grace of God.

"Do not think about or do anything without a spiritual purpose, whereby it is done for God. For If you travel without purpose, you shall labor in vain." ~ St. Mark the Ascetic. (5th century)

From this value grew Monasticism.

4.0 Conclusion

The confines of the paper limit me to two illustrations of the three ways modern Western thinking weighs the values from the three different legacies. I chose ambition because it is a strong modern value with

both positive and negative connotations, I chose Aestheticism because it is a broader consideration in times of constraint and frugality and cannot be wrapped up in one word. A note on the Christian component. One does not have to be a participant in the faith to be influenced by what is already built into our culture. All three cultures are predicated on religion and I avoided the application of faith.

The values handed down to our generation from Greece, through Rome, and through Christendom never went away. None were really dismissed but were layered in and interwoven into the Western culture. They were not mutually compatible. Thus, the trichotomy of Western values.

Much like a philosophy course, each value presented on its own appears to be a valid way of thinking. The modern Western mind gets to choose which one to be actionable.

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