



A Civil Religion

How Christianity created free and prosperous societies

By Rodney Stark

When Europeans first began to explore the globe, their greatest surprise was not the existence of the Western hemisphere, but the extent of their own technological superiority over the rest of the world. Not only were the proud Mayan, Aztec, and Inca nations helpless in the face of European intruders, so were the fabled civilizations of the East. China, India, and the nations of Islam were backward by comparison with sixteenth-century Europe.

How had this happened? Why was it that although many civilizations had pursued alchemy, it led to chemistry only in Europe? Why was it that Europeans were for centuries the only people who possessed eyeglasses, chimneys, reliable clocks, heavy cavalry, or a system of music notation? How had nations that had arisen from barbarism and the rubble of fallen Rome so greatly surpassed the rest of the world?

Many authors attribute Western domination to the rise of capitalism, which took place only in Europe. Even the most militant enemies of capitalism credit it with creating previously undreamed of productivity and progress. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued that prior to the rise of capitalism humans were “slothful,” and that the capitalist system was “the first to show what man’s activity can bring about.” By motivating both management and labor through ever-rising payoffs, capitalism created “more colossal productive forces than all the preceding generations together.”

Supposing that capitalism did produce Europe’s great leap forward, however, it still

remains to be explained why capitalism developed only in Europe. If one digs deep, it becomes clear that the fundamental basis for capitalism and the rise of the West in general was an extraordinary embrace of *reason*. And, contrary to many modern understandings, this attachment to



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reason did not grow in spite of religious faith, but mostly through religious faith.

Christianity's faith in reason

A series of developments allowed reason to shape Western culture and institutions. The most important of these victories occurred within Christianity. While the other world religions emphasized mystery and intuition, Christianity alone embraced reasoning and logic as the primary guide to religious truth.

As conceived by Chinese philosophers, the universe simply is and always was. They saw no reason to suppose that it functions according to rational laws, or that it could be comprehended in physical rather than mystical terms. Through the millennia, Chinese intellectuals pursued "enlightenment," not explanations. As the Oxford scholar Joseph Needham put it, "The conception of a divine celestial lawgiver imposing ordinances on non-human nature never developed."

In Islam, Allah is not presented as a lawful creator, but rather as an extremely active and capricious God who intrudes on the world as he deems appropriate. This prompted the formation of a major theological bloc within Islam that condemns all efforts to formulate natural laws, in that they deny Allah's freedom to act. Islam assumed that the world was sustained by his will on a continuing basis.

But from early days, Christian fathers taught that reason was the supreme gift from God and the means to increase their understanding of Scripture and revelation. Consequently, Christianity was oriented to the future, while the other major religions asserted the superiority of the past. Encouraged by the Scholastics and the great medieval universities founded by the church, faith in reason seeped into all of Western culture. One of its products was science.

During the past century, many intellectuals have assumed that the West surged ahead in areas like capitalism and science precisely as it overcame religious barriers. But in truth, the success of the West in these pursuits rests heavily on religious foundations, and the people who drove the progress were mostly devout Christians. This is true even of the rise of science—which was effectively nurtured by Christianity. (See my earlier article "False Conflict" in the October/November 2003 issue of TAE.)

The Christian roots of self-governance

Equally unappreciated by many modern minds is the fact that democracy, and the moral equality at its root, are also products of Christianity. Through most of human history, and in many parts of the world even today, it has not been assumed that human beings are or deserve to be equals. Only in the Christian West does an assumption of moral equality take precedence, informing social practices and guaranteeing equality before the law, universal voting, and many other forms of equal rights.

How many admirers of John Locke's writing realize that Locke explicitly based his democratic theses on Christian doctrines of moral equality? Most contemporary textbook accounts of the birth of our nation carefully ignore the religious aspect, as if the most famous lines from the Declaration of Independence ("that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights") had been written by a bunch of skeptics.

While the classical world provides examples of democracy, these were not rooted in any general assumptions of equality extending beyond the elite. Even when they were ruled by elected bodies, Rome and the various Greek city-states were sustained by huge numbers of slaves. And just as it was Christianity that eliminated the institution of slavery inherited from Greece and Rome, so too does Western democracy owe its essential intellectual origins and legitimacy to Christian ideas. It all began with the New Testament.

Jesus asserted a revolutionary conception of moral equality, not only in words, but in deeds. Over and over he ignored status boundaries, and worked with stigmatized people, including Samaritans, publicans, immoral women, and various other outcasts, giving divine sanction to an inclusive society. It was in precisely this spirit that Paul admonished: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

Regardless of worldly inequalities, the revolutionary new doctrine of Christianity asserted, there is real social equality in the most important sense: in the eyes of God and in the life to come. Paul warned slave masters of this: "He who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him." The writers of the New Testament made it crystal clear that equality in the eyes of God has deep implications

for how people ought to be treated in this world.

Thus was the pattern set. In an extremely status-conscious Roman world, early Christians strove to embrace a universalistic conception of humanity. This was spelled out by the third-century Christian Lactantius:

The second constituent of justice is *equality*. I mean this... in the sense of treating others as one's equals.... For God who gives being and life to men wished us all to be equal.... But someone will say, "Don't you have poor and rich, slaves and masters in your community?" "Aren't there distinctions between one member and another?" Not at all! This is precisely the reason that we address one another as 'Brother,' since we believe we are one another's equals. Since human worth is measured in spiritual not in physical terms, we ignore our various physical situations: slaves are not slaves to us, but we treat them and address them as brothers in the spirit, fellow slaves in devotion to God. Wealth, too, is

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no ground for distinction, except insofar as it provides the opportunity for preeminence in good works.

From here it was but a few steps to the building blocks of democratic society. The ideas that each individual has rights that must not be infringed upon without due cause, that citizens should be secure in their homes and property—such doctrines are anathema to despots. But they are implied directly by Christian theology.

Despots, whether modern or ancient, rely not simply on fear and corruption to maintain their rule. They also count on a lessened sense of self—of individualism—among their subjects. In the ancient world, East and West, this lack of individualism could be counted on, since no other concept was known. But after the collapse of Rome and the spread of Christianity, the West developed a sense of individualism that supported ideas of equality, moral obligation, and a complex civil society.

Ending slavery

From its earliest days, Christianity was inventive in its conceptions of human nature, of personal liberty, and of morality. The notion that individualism had to be *discovered* seems absurd to the modern mind. All normal humans know themselves as separate creatures who necessarily look out upon the world from a unique point of vision. Nevertheless, many cultures suppress the sense of self.

From the beginning, Christianity has taught that sin is a personal matter—that it does not inhere primarily in the group, but that each individual must be concerned with her or his personal salvation. Perhaps nothing is of greater significance to the Christian emphasis on individualism than the doctrine of free will. If, as Shakespeare wrote, the fault for tragedies is “in ourselves,” it is because we believe we have the opportunity to choose, and the responsibility to choose well. Unlike the Greeks and Romans, whose gods were remarkably lacking in virtues and did not concern themselves with human misbehavior (other than failures to propitiate them in an appropriate manner), the Christian God is a judge who rewards “virtue” and punishes “sin.”

The admonition “Go and sin no more” is the fundamental Christian charge to humans. Saint Augustine wrote again and again that we “possess a will,” and that “from this it follows that whoever desires to live righteously and honorably can accomplish this.” Such reasoning led Augustine to conclude that astrology is false, because to believe that one’s fate is predestined in the stars stands in opposition to God’s gift of freedom. Jesus taught that each individual must atone for moral lapses precisely because these are wrong personal choices. There could be no more compelling intellectual emphasis on self and individuality.

These Christian principles prompted not only self-examination, but also deep questions about how citizens should

treat each other, and where a society should set the boundaries to freedom. As the church fathers pondered the implications of free will, they grew increasingly uncomfortable with institutions like slavery. In classical times, freedom was a privilege, not a right. Neither Plato nor Aristotle condemned slavery—indeed, they both

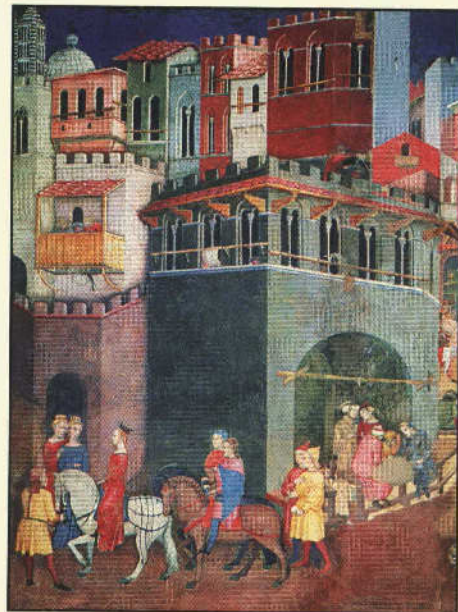
justified it, and each owned slaves. But by the middle ages, slavery was on the way out in Europe.

Some historians deny there was an end to medieval slavery—they say there was simply a linguistic shift in which the word “slave” was replaced by the word “serf.” But serfs were not chattels; they had rights and a substantial degree of discretion. They married whom they wished, and their families were not subject to sale or dispersal. They paid rent and thus controlled their own time and the pace of their work. If, as in some places, serfs owed their lords a number of days of labor each year, the obligation was limited and more similar to hired labor than to slavery. Although serfs were bound to a lord by extensive obligations, so too was their lord bound by obligations to them as well as to a higher authority. And so on up the line, for sets of mutual obligations were the rule of feudalism.

While not free in the modern sense, medieval serfs were not slaves. And by the end of the tenth century, the brutal institution of slavery had disappeared from Europe. This happened because the church extended its sacraments to all slaves, and then managed to impose a ban on enslavement.

Property rights and government limits

Few innovations have had a greater impact in building Western societies than the development of a concept of natural property rights. The Bible takes private property rights for granted, often condemning infringements such as theft or fraud. Although some early church fathers only grudgingly accepted these rights, Saint Augustine regarded private property as a natural condition. In the centuries following his death in 430 A.D., this became the prevalent view. Giles of Rome, writing in the twelfth century, charged rulers with the defense of private



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property: "It will be the duty of the earthly power to do justice in these respects, so that no one may injure another...in his own property, but every citizen and every faithful man may enjoy his goods." Saints Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas agreed.

But Christian theologians were not content merely to legitimate private property. Pursuing the logical implications of the right of private property led William of Ockham and other theologians to conclude that rulers cannot usurp or arbitrarily seize the property of those over whom they rule. A sovereign can infringe on private property only when "he shall see that the common welfare takes preference over private interest." But "he cannot do this at his own arbitrary discretion." Here is another key premise of political liberty.

Christianity (very much unlike Islam, for instance) also bequeathed an additional concept to the free society: the separation of church and state. This was stipulated by Jesus: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." Having suffered for several centuries as a group of sometimes persecuted outsiders, the church never fully embraced the state. And once the threat of persecution no longer hung over them, Christian theologians became increasingly critical of the moral authority of the state.

By affirming the secularity of kingship, the church made it possible to examine the basis of worldly power and the interplay of rights and rule. Right from the time of Augustine, Christian writers have felt justified in sharply critiquing the state, even in rejecting certain forms of rule like monarchy. The "divine right" of kings was sometimes asserted by men wearing crowns, but it was *not* ratified by the church. John Wycliffe pointed out that if kings were chosen by God and ruled with divine rights, then God must assist and approve the sins of tyrants—a "blasphemous conclusion!"

Christians concluded that deposing a tyrant could be a virtuous act. "If to provide itself with a king belongs to the right of a given multitude, it is not unjust that the king be deposed or have his power restricted by that same multitude if, becoming a tyrant, he abuses his royal power," wrote Aquinas in *On Kingship*. This idea—the bedrock of true freedom and voluntary society—resulted in the European multitudes beginning to work out schemes to prevent political tyranny.

Christianity and modern society

To put it simply, Christianity created Western societies. Without a theology committed to reason, progress, and moral equality, today the entire world would be about where non-European societies were in, say, 1800: A world with many astrologers and alchemists, but no scientists. A world of despots, lacking universities, banks, factories, eyeglasses, chimneys, and pianos. A world where many infants do not live to the age of five, and many

women die in childbirth—a world truly living in "dark ages."

Modernity arose only in Christian societies. Not in Asia. Not in Islam. Not in a "secular" society—there having been none. And all the modernization that has since occurred outside Christendom was imported from the West, often brought by colonizers and missionaries. Absent the Christian emphasis on free will, personal responsibility for moral decisions, obligations to neighbors created in the image of a just God who makes no distinctions based on wealth or power, and the efficacy of reason, none of the conditions that gave rise to the West would have developed as they did.

Viewing themselves as part of an intelligible, created universe whose secrets can be unlocked through logic and learning, Christians found virtue in both intense study and great activity. Confident that creation is good, if fallen, and that our intellectual, physical, and spiritual gifts are to be used to the glory of God, Christians created a tremendous flowering of human creativity exceeding anything known elsewhere. Take away Christianity, and you take away the central means by which free and prosperous Western societies were born.

Today, Christianity is becoming globalized far more rapidly than is democracy, capitalism, or modernity, as people the world over have seen fit to embrace the Christian religion and the progressive societies it engenders. There are many reasons people adopt Christianity, including its capacity to sustain a deeply emotional and existentially satisfying faith. But another significant factor is the appeal of the communities and civilizations it gives rise to. Christianity thus remains an essential element in the globalization of humane living.

Consider this recent statement by one of China's leading scholars:

One of the things we were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact the pre-eminence, of the West... We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past 20 years, we have realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West is so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubt about this.

Neither do I.

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