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Western Civilization I

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The Influence of Christianity on Western Civilization

The positive influence of Christianity is far reaching especially in the rich history and culture of Western Civilization despite a long standing ignorance or adamant denial of its contributions. The Bible itself is responsible for much of the language, literature, and fine arts we enjoy today as its artists and composers were heavily influenced by its writings. Paul Maier, in writing the forward to the book *How Christianity Changed the World* by Alvin J. Schmidt, says this about the profound impact Christianity has had on the development of Western Civilization:

“No other religion, philosophy, teaching, nation, movement—whatever—has so changed the world for the better as Christianity has done. Its shortcomings, clearly conceded by this author, are nevertheless heavily outweighed by its benefits to all mankind” (Schmidt 9).

Contrary to the history texts treatment of the subject, Christian influence on values, beliefs, and practices in Western culture are abundant and well ingrained into the flourishing society of today (Schmidt 12). In the Old Testament book of Hosea the writer states: “my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge,” a statement that can well be applied to those today who are forgetful of the past (*The Reformation Study Bible*, Hosea 4.6a).

Schmidt writes regarding liberty and justice as seen by today’s culture:

“The liberty and justice that are enjoyed by humans in Western societies and in some non-Western countries are increasingly seen as the products of a benevolent, secular government

that is the provider of all things. There seems to be no awareness that the liberties and rights that are currently operative in free societies of the West are to a great degree the result of Christianity's influence (248). History is replete with examples of individuals who acted as a law unto themselves "often curtailing, even obliterating the natural rights and freedoms of the country's citizens (249). Christianity's influence, however, set into motion the belief that man is accountable to God and that the law is the same regardless of status. More than one thousand years before the birth of Christ the biblical requirement given by Moses comprised an essential component of the principle that "no man is above the law."

One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

(Deuteronomy 19.15)

Thus the accuser, regardless of position in society, could not arbitrarily incarcerate or execute the accused and was himself subject to the law. The New Testament also mandated two or more witnesses in ecclesiastical matters regarding an erring Christian in Matthew 18:15-17 (Schmidt 249). The criminal and justice systems of many free countries today employ this Judeo-Christian requirement of having witnesses testify and in British and American jurisprudence, witnesses are part of "due process of law," a legal concept first appearing under King Edward III in the fourteenth century (Schmidt 249). One startling example of the concept that no man is above the law is seen in the conflict between the Christian emperor Theodosius the Great and St. Ambrose. It happened in 390 A.D. when some in Thessalonica rioted and aroused the anger of the emperor who overreacted by slaughtering approximately seven thousand people, most of whom were innocent. Bishop Ambrose asked the emperor to repent and when Theodosius refused, the bishop excommunicated him. After a month Theodosius prostrated himself and

repented in Ambrose's cathedral. Often mistaken as a struggle for power between church and state, the evidence in which Ambrose's letter to the emperor cited sole concern for the emperor's spiritual welfare conclude this as being the first instance of applying the principle that no one is above the law (Schmidt 250).

The Magna Carta served as a courageous precedent some five hundred years later to the American patriots in the creation of the unique government of the United States. The charter, signed in 1215 at Runnymede by King John granted a number of rights never held before this historic occasion including that "(1) justice could no longer be sold or denied to freeman who were under authority of barons; (2) no taxes could be levied without representation; (3) no one would be imprisoned without a trial; and (4) property could not be taken from the owner without just compensation (Schmidt 251). The Magna Carta had important Christian ties as demonstrated by its preamble that began, "John, by the grace of God..." and stated that the charter was formulated out of "reverence for God and for the salvation of our soul and those of all our ancestors and heirs, for the honour of God and the exaltation of Holy Church and the reform of our realm, on the advice of our reverend [church] fathers" (Schmidt 251). This document also followed the precedent established in 325 at the Council of Nicaea in which Christian bishops wrote and adopted a formal code of fundamental beliefs to which all Christians were expected to adhere. The Magna Carta displayed what its formulators as Christians expected of the king and his subjects regarding civic liberties (Schmidt 251).

Natural law is a concept with a long history dating back to the Greco-Roman philosophers. Despite some variations among philosophers one point of agreement was understood as "that process in nature by which human beings, through the use of sound reason, were able to perceive what was morally right and wrong" (Schmidt253). With the emergence of

Christianity common law was clarified to state that “natural law was not an entity by itself but part of God’s created order in nature through which he made all rational human beings aware of what is right and wrong” (Schmidt 253). The Apostle Paul expressed this in the New Testament book of Romans:

“For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them” (Romans 2.14-15).

Martin Luther stated: “Why does one then teach the Ten Commandments? Because the natural laws were never so orderly and well written as by Moses” (Schmidt 253). In his *Two Treatises of Government*, physician and political philosopher John Locke (1632-1703) claimed that government existed only to uphold the natural law and that governmental tyranny violated the natural rights of man (Schmidt 253). Natural rights were derived from nature and not from kings or government. The renowned English scholar Sir William Blackstone had immense influence on the American patriots in the eighteenth century who used his *Commentaries of the Laws of England* (1765) while formulating the fledgling government as evidenced by the Declaration of Independence. The words “the Law of Nature and of Nature’s God” document the reliability on the Christian understanding of the natural law (Schmidt 254). The Declaration of Independence goes on to state that “whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government,” thus reiterating the concept of “inalienable rights” given by nature. The term “self-evident” has Christian roots going back to theological writings of the eighth century. Schmidt quotes Gary Amos, author of *Defending the Declaration*, as saying: “To the medievalists, ‘self-evident’

knowledge was truth known intuitively, as direct revelation from God, without the need for proofs. The term presumed that man was created in the image of God, and presumed certain beliefs about man's rationality which can be traced as far back as Augustine in the early fifth century" (pp. 254-55). Schmidt believes it is quite plausible that St. Paul's biblical concept of "self-evident" (Romans 1.20) knowingly or unknowingly influenced Jefferson when he wrote the term into the Declaration (Schmidt 255). The last portion of the Declaration includes the phrase "Supreme Judge," a term used in Locke's *The Second Treatise of Government*, where he refers to Jephthah calling God "the Judge" in Israel's fight against the Ammonites (Judges 11.27). If this is taken from Locke's work, Amos contends, "then we have a direct link between the Bible and the Declaration of Independence (Schmidt 255).

The Constitution, the hallmark of the founding government in America, was greatly influenced by the French Christian and philosopher Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755) as evidenced by the three branches of America's government. Schmidt makes note that one historian has said that Montesquieu's book, *The Spirit of the Laws (1748)*, "[gave] American Constitution writers their holy writ" and called Montesquieu "the godfather of the American Constitution" (256). Montesquieu's political theory was incorporated into the Constitution mostly as a result of the role taken by James Madison, known as the principal architect. His arguments for a separation of powers stemmed from the Christian teaching of the fallen nature of man. He is quoted as saying, "The truth [is] that all men, having power ought to be distrusted, to a certain degree." In his Federalist Paper number 51 he notes, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary" (Schmidt 257). Many history texts have made note that the three powers are derived from Montesquieu's theory but have failed to note the influence of Christianity on his beliefs: "It is not enough for a religion to establish a doctrine; it must also

direct its influence. This the Christian religion performs in the most admirable manner, especially with respect to the doctrines of which we have been speaking. It makes us hope for a state which is the object of our belief; not for a state which we have already experienced or known” (Schmidt 257).

The founding of America’s republic government can best be described as the pinnacle of our American Christian heritage. Noah Webster defined government in his *American Dictionary of the English Language (1828)* as: “Direction; regulation. ‘These precepts will serve for the *government* of our conduct.’ Control; restraint. ‘Men are apt to neglect the *government* of their temper and passions.’” Thus Webster defines government in a way that reflects the biblical concept of governmental authority, that is, beginning with the individual and extending outward to include all institutions (DeMar, *God and Government*, pp. 4-5). The Founding Fathers recognized the importance of self-government. As DeMar states, “A self-governed individual is someone who can regulate his attitudes and actions without the need for external coercion” (14). Believing God’s law to be the sole standard for determining right and wrong John Adams wrote, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is inadequate to the government of any other.” The words of Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) reveal the mindset of many who fled to the shores of America in search of religious freedom:

“He knows not how to rule a Kingdom, that cannot manage a Province; nor can he wield a Province, that cannot order a City; nor he order a City, that knows not how to regulate a Village; nor he a Family that knows not how to Govern himself; neither can any Govern himself unless his reason be Lord, Will and Appetite her Vassals; nor can Reason rule unless herself ruled by God, and (wholly) be obedient to Him.”

Though the Constitution does not implicitly assume a Christian nation or acknowledgement of the providence of God in national affairs, an omission greatly regretted by the Christian public at the time of adoption (Morris 296), fundamentals of Christianity were incorporated into the State Constitutions of the Revolution which demonstrated the Christian life and character of our civil institutions (Morris 269).

Among other things, the influence of Christianity has spread into the concept of freedom and rights of the individual. Without this freedom there is no real freedom on the economic, political, or religious level (Schmidt 258). From its inception, Christianity has placed a high value on the individual in stark contrast to the Greco-Roman culture in which the individual was always subordinate to the state (Schmidt 259). Malcolm Muggeridge, once a non-Christian but later a strong defender of Christianity, said, “We must not forget that our human rights are derived from the Christian faith. In Christian terms every single human being, whoever he or she may be, sick or well, clever or foolish, beautiful or ugly, every human being is loved by his Creator, who as the Gospels tell us, counted the hairs of his head.” (Schmidt 260). Individual freedom has led to many positive effects in the history of Western society. One essential aspect of this began with individuals such as Tertullian, Lactantius, St. Augustine, and later Martin Luther who promoted religious freedom. Luther, standing before Emperor Charles V and the Diet of Worms in 1521 declared:

“Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me, Amen.” The First Amendment echoes the desire of prominent Christian forbears in promoting religious liberty and freedom of the individual (Schmidt 263).

Christianity's influence on education can be seen at its very inception with the teachings of Jesus who used words, parables, and human-life illustrations and taught others who then would become teachers themselves (Schmidt 170). Schmidt notes that the earliest Christians were mostly Jews who came from a long-standing tradition that valued formal education. St. Paul in his epistles makes references to Christians teaching in Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, Thessalonica, as well as other places (171). Teaching continued after the death of the apostles and in the very early church (A.D. 80-110) the *Didache*, basically an instruction manual for new converts to Christianity, appeared. Ignatius, a bishop of Antioch in the first decade of the second century, insisted that children be taught the Scriptures and a skilled trade, a concept carried over from the Jews (Schmidt 171). Jesus Christ's command to the disciples and all Christians was to teach people "all things" that he commanded him. Newcomers, in preparation for baptism and church membership, were taught orally by the question and answer method. Both men and women over a period of two to three years were catechized and first were instructed in the teacher's home (Schmidt 171). These types of instruction lead to formal catechetical schools with a strong emphasis on the literary. Justin Martyr, around A.D. 150, established schools in Ephesus and in Rome. Other schools quickly spread throughout the regions. The school in Alexandria, Egypt was well noted for its literary qualities (Schmidt 171). Christian doctrine was the primary focus of these schools though the one in Alexandria also taught mathematics and medicine and when Origen succeeded Clement he added grammar classes (Schmidt 172). Although Christians were not the first to engage in formal teaching it appears they were the first to teach both sexes in the same setting. Schmidt notes W.M. Ramsey as stating that Christianity's aim was "universal education, not education confined to the rich, as among Greeks and Romans...and it [made] no distinction of sex" (172). St. Augustine once said that Christian

women were better informed in divine matters than the pagan male philosophers (Schmidt 172). Details on the education of children are not known until the fourth to the tenth century when cathedrals and episcopal schools were maintained by bishops. The schools taught not only Christian doctrine but also the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and quadrivium (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy). The episcopal schools primarily trained priests but also enrolled others. Children of royalty and the higher social ranks attended the cathedral schools and others were instructed in monasteries or nunneries, where girls predominated. Although children were encouraged to enter church vocations most entered secular ones.

At the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther, to his dismay, found widespread ignorance when he visited the churches in Saxony. He proceeded to write *Small Catechism* in 1529 noting that the common people had little to no knowledge of Christian teachings and that many pastors were incompetent to teach. He criticized the bishops for this indiscretion (Schmidt 176). Luther urged a state school system “to include vernacular primary schools for sexes, Latin secondary schools, and universities.” He also said that parents who failed to teach their children were “shameful and despicable” (Schmidt 177).

Education in early America was built on the heels of the Reformation of the sixteenth century which “stressed reclamation of all of life, with education as an essential transforming force (DeMar, *America’s Christian Heritage*, 39). Modeling the Academy of Geneva (founded by John Calvin in 1559), universities sprang up that would apply the Bible to all of life (DeMar 39). One of the first colleges to be founded was Harvard in 1636 three years after John Eliot (1604-1690) first proposed a college for Massachusetts Bay. Harvard’s curriculum emphasized the study of biblical languages (Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic), logic, divinity (theology), and communication (public speaking and rhetoric). Latin also linked students to classical studies and

the writings of the church fathers (DeMar 43). The Puritans held to the belief that the collegiate education proper for a minister should also be the same for educated laymen. There was no great distinction between secular and theological learning (DeMar 44). The early motto of Harvard was *Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae* (“Truth for Christ and the Church”). Harvard’s motto today has been reduced simply to *Veritas* (DeMar 45). Other early universities built exclusively on Christian principles were William and Mary (1693), Yale (1701), Princeton (1746), King’s College (1754), Brown (1764), Rutgers (1766), and Dartmouth (1769) (p. 42). The education of colonial children was provided by a curriculum of three books in addition to the Bible: the Hornbook, the New England Primer, and the Bay Psalm book. The Hornbook, a single parchment attached to a wooden paddle, contained the alphabet, the Lord’s Prayer, and religious doctrines written or printed on it. The 1690 first edition of the Primer contained the names of the Old and New Testament books, the Lord’s Prayer, “An Alphabet of Lessons for Youth,” the Apostle’s Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Westminster Assembly Shorter Catechism, and John Cotton’s “Spiritual Milk for American Babes” (DeMar 41). The Primer was the most commonly used textbook for almost 200 years. Another popular textbook was The McGuffey Reader (Schippe 9). Noah Webster, educator and compiler of the 1828 *An American Dictionary of the English Language* wrote: “Education without the Bible is useless.” (DeMar, *America’s Christian Heritage*, 40) Christian faith was integrated into every facet of education in early America.

Christianity’s influence on language, literature, and the arts is often overlooked and even taken for granted. Without the Bible much of what we enjoy today would be non-existent. The English language incorporates many words and phrases taken from the Bible when first translated. In 1380 John Wycliffe translated the Scriptures in its entirety and from it appears

many of the words we still use today including the words adoption, ambitious, cucumber, liberty, and scapegoat among others (Schippe 12). William Tyndale translated the first English translation from the original texts. A gifted linguist skilled in eight languages with impeccable insights into Hebrew and Greek, Tyndale was eager to translate the Bible so even “the boy that drives the plow” could know the Bible (Schippe 13). Some familiar words and phrases of his include: “let there be light (Genesis 1.3),” “the powers that be (Romans 13.1),” “a law unto themselves (Romans 2.14),” and “fight the good fight (1 Timothy 6.12)” (Schippe 13). The influence of Tyndale on the English language was solidified in the publication of the 1611 King James Bible which retained about 94 percent of Tyndale’s work (Schippe 12). A renowned scholar on the literature of the Bible, Alistair McGrath notes, “Without the King James Bible, there would have been no *Paradise Lost*, no *Pilgrim’s Progress*, no Handel’s *Messiah*, no Negro spirituals, and no Gettysburg Address” (Schippe 12). Despite the hostility and persecution towards the Christians in the early centuries under Nero and Domitian and later under the Catholic Church prior to the Reformation the Scriptures were meticulously copied by the priests and monks which in later years were translated into the languages of the common people even under threat of punishment (Schippe 14). Tyndale first worked in secret and when later betrayed and about to be burnt at the stake he called out, “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes.” Within a year King Henry allowed English Bibles to be distributed. Two million English Bibles were distributed throughout a country of just over six million nearly seventy-five years after Tyndale’s death (Schippe 14).

Writers, artists, and musicians over the centuries have been greatly influenced by the Bible. From Dante to Milton to Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the words and themes found in the Scriptures have made their way into much of the literature we study and enjoy today. Other great

writers in the history of Western Civilization include Chaucer, William Shakespeare, John Donne, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, William Blake, T.S. Eliot, and William Faulkner, to name a few (Schippe 44). Art depicting biblical scenes was made popular especially during the Renaissance with artists such as Raphael, Michelangelo, and Rembrandt. Johann Sebastian Bach, one of the most famous composers, was greatly influenced by the Scriptures. His Magnificat was written for the Christmas service of 1723 at St. Thomas's Church in Leipzig (Schippe 237). The cantata, a genre of vocal music in the Baroque period and a key part of the German Lutheran service, was primarily used in Bach's music. A deeply religious man, Bach signed his cantatas "S.D.G., which stands for Soli Deo Gloria—"to God alone the glory" (Schippe 237). Many other forms of music known today have Christian roots such as the sonata, the symphony, and the oratorio. Most forms of music began as psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs and the outgrowth from there progressed as the monks and churches spread throughout the ages. Ambrose (340-97) first had members of his congregation sing psalms antiphonally and allowed all people to participate in the morning and evening church services by setting the words of his hymns to "an easy metrical form, the iambic diameter (Schippe 316). Biblical stories were dramatized and performed in song as early as the ninth century. A well-known church drama in the tenth century was *Visitatio sepulchri* (The Visit to [Christ's] Sepulcher). Schmidt notes there is good reason to believe the opera evolved out of church dramas that appeared five hundred years before the Renaissance (316-17). The works of Handel, Beethoven, Mozart, and Mendelssohn among others have greatly been influenced by the words of the Bible; oftentimes the music itself directly reflected that influence (Schippe 328-29).

With the publishing of Andrew Dickson White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* in 1896 the idea that Christianity was responsible for the arrival

of science has largely been pushed out of the minds of the people, especially in academic circles (Schmidt 218-19). However, there is a pronounced difference between the pagan and Christian religions, that being the Christian presupposition of one God who is a rational being. Schmidt asks the question, ‘If God is a rational being, then may not human beings, who are made in his image, also employ rational processes to study and investigate the world in which they live?’ (219). It was Robert Grosseteste (ca. 1168-1253), a Franciscan bishop and first chancellor of Oxford University, who first proposed the inductive, experimental method and his student, Roger Bacon (1214-94) who asserted that “all things must be verified by experience.” Nearly three hundred years later Francis Bacon (1561-1626) gave momentum to the inductive method by recording his experimental results. Bacon has been called “the practical creator of scientific induction.” Besides his scientific interests he also devoted time to theology and wrote treatises on the Psalms and prayer (Schmidt 219). The inductive empirical method guided by rational procedures stood in stark contrast from the ancient Greek perspective of Aristotle which had a stranglehold on the world for fifteen hundred years. Even after these empirically minded individuals introduced their idea the scholastic world for the most part continued to hold to Aristotelianism which was the real “struggle” between the Catholic Church and science (Schmidt 219-220). One other prominent presupposition of Christianity is that God, who created the world, is separate and distinct from it unlike Aristotelian philosophy which saw the gods and universe intertwined. Pantheism regarded the scientific method as sacrilegious and an affront to divine nature and thus only in Christian thought where God and nature are separate would science be possible (Schmidt 221).

Schmidt quotes Lynn White, historian of medieval science, as saying “From the thirteenth century onward into the eighteenth every major scientist, in effect, explained his motivations in

religious terms” (222). William Occam (1280-1349) had a great influence on the development of modern science. His concept known as “Occam’s Razor” was the scientific principle that states that what can be done or explained with the fewest assumptions should be used. It is the principle of parsimony. As was common with almost all medieval natural philosophers, Occam did not confine himself to scientific matters and wrote two theological treatises, one dealing with the Lord’s Supper and the other with the body of Christ, both of which had a tremendous impact on Martin Luther’s thinking (Schmidt 222). Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519), while a great artist and painter was also a scientific genius who analyzed and theorized in the areas of botany, optics, physics, hydraulics, and aeronautics. However, his greatest benefit to science was in the study of physiology in which he produced meticulous drawings of the human body (Schmidt 223). Andreas Vesalius (1514-64) followed in Da Vinci’s footsteps. In his famous work, *De humani corporis fabrica* (Fabric of the Human Body), published in 1543, he corrects over two hundred errors in Galen’s physiological writings. (Galen was a Greek physician of the second century) The errors were largely found by dissecting cadavers (Schmidt 223). The branch of genetics flourished under the work of Gregor Johann Mendel (1822-1884), an Augustinian monk, who after studying Darwin’s theory of evolution rejected it (Schmidt 224). In the field of astronomy great advances were made under devout Christian men Copernicus, Brahe, Kepler, and Galileo. In physics we encounter Isaac Newton (1642-1727), Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), Blaise Pascal (1623-62), Alessandro Volta (1745-1827), Georg Simon Ohm (1787-1854), Andre Ampere (1775-1836), Michael Faraday (1791-1867), and William Thompson Kelvin (1824-1907). These men held to a strong Christian faith as evidenced by their writings. Before he died, Kepler was asked by an attending Lutheran pastor where he placed his faith. Kepler replied, “Solely and alone in the work of our redeemer Jesus Christ.” Kepler, who only tried “thinking

God's thoughts after him," died with the Christian faith planted firmly in his mind and heart. His epitaph, penned four months before his death stated:

I used to measure the heavens,
Now I must measure the earth.
Though sky-bound was my spirit,
My earthly body rests here (Schmidt 230).

Such was the mindset of the fathers of modern science who held to deeply religious beliefs and saw no contradiction between faith and science. Had it not been for those men who believed in a rational God who created rational men who sought only to understand the world that God had created and obeyed the command to have "dominion" (Genesis 1.28) over the earth, science would not be as it is today.

History books are filled with the rich details of men and women whose lives were changed by Jesus Christ and impacted the world through ideas found in Scripture in a wide array of disciplines. To deny the influence of Christianity on Western Civilization is to deny history altogether. Although at certain times there loomed dark areas in church history by those who deviated from the faith the overall positive contributions far outweigh the negative. There is no mistaking the fact that Christianity has changed the world for the better.

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