



The Left's "ABC" ("Anything But Christianity") Syndrome

The Left has an "Anything But Christianity" attitude because it wants to erase individuality and God-given human rights — both products of Christianity — to empower government.



Ever since the genesis of the so-called Left — a broad coalition of social, political, and cultural movements and organizations whose aim has been to establish socialism across the Western world — the most obvious trait of leftists in general has been their distaste for Judeo-Christian mores and culture. Leftists may disagree on a range of issues, but they are generally united in their hostility to Christianity, as well as their accommodation of nearly every other type of religion, from the philosophy religions of the East to the various shamanic and animistic traditions of the world's aboriginal peoples.

What we might call the "ABC syndrome" ("Anything But Christianity") is familiar to everyone on the Right. It is widely recognized that the campaign against limited government and against the Constitution has turned into an all-out culture war. This "culture war" is nothing new: French revolutionaries in the late 1700s attempted to purge France of Christianity and to impose radical secularist values on French society, as evidenced by their persecution of the staunch Catholics of the Vendée, their rejection of the Christian calendar, and their desecration of Christian churches, including the Notre Dame cathedral. Meanwhile, the founding theorist of communism, Karl Marx, considered religion akin to a harmful drug, famously calling it "the opiate of the masses."

But why is the Left so hostile to traditional Western religion and culture, particularly Christianity? How can the Left's hatred of Judeo-Christianity be squared with its enthusiasm for certain flavors of non-Western religion? Many leftists are fascinated with "New Age" religion, which attempts to blend features of eastern religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, with the shamanic beliefs of tribal cultures worldwide.

Undoing Right and Wrong

The term "religion" comes from a Latin root meaning to "bind together." This is because no force more strongly unites a society than does shared religious belief. The fact that the English term for the collective output of a society or civilization, "culture," also stems from a Latin word for religion (*cultus*) only serves to emphasize what we all instinctively grasp, namely, that religion, in some deep and complex way, is the ultimate wellspring of all society and culture.

Why is this so? Because religion is a symbol of the Ultimate, a portrait of how finite, mortal man situates himself within an eternal cosmos. Society and culture are attempts by mortals to create things that will outlast their finite, individual lives. Our art, architecture, literature, traditions, modes of



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worship, corporations, science, and so forth, are created with an expectation of permanence. Even though we understand that bridges fail, buildings crumble, statues erode, and printing fades, we expect our creations to outlast our own puny lives, and to be renewed by others in their turn. Even when an epic catastrophe such as 9-11 takes place, our instinct is to rebuild larger and grander than before, to cheat time of its due.

In some sense, and however imperfectly, we understand that time — mortal, finite time — is nothing but a pale reflection of eternity. Although we do not last forever ourselves, we grasp that, beyond space and time, there are things that do. And so we model our customs, mores, social structures, and even laws and governments after the eternal patterns dictated by our religious beliefs.

This is very obviously true among ancient faiths where religion and state were merged, and where heads of state were assumed to be the mouthpieces of the gods, if not gods themselves. It is also true in the Christian faith; otherwise, why are terms such as “kingdom of heaven,” “Prince of Peace,” and “King of Kings” applied to beings and realms utterly beyond mortal understanding?

In general, religious tenets provide the basis for notions of right and wrong, including justice, law, and the proper limits (if there be any) of earthly government.

Consider the concepts of the individual, of individual progress, and of inherent, God-given individual rights, which are the very basis for Western ideas of ordered liberty and limited government. Where do such ideas come from? It is a striking fact that the idea of individuality is found only in very feeble, imperfect form in most cultures throughout human history. Collectivism in one form or another is far more common — indeed, in a number of ancient cultures, such as China and India, it has always been the norm. And where the idea of individuality is muted, the notion of individual rights is incomprehensible.

What about the idea of progress? The idea of progress in the modern sense dates from the Renaissance; it is not found earlier, except in very fragmented form in a few of the writings of Seneca and a few other sources among the ancient Romans (Rome’s many similarities to the modern West notwithstanding). In fact, the robust emphasis on individuality and progress that Westerners, and especially Americans, take for granted, is almost entirely confined to Western culture.

But what is it about Western culture that begat these ideas in the first place? Simply enough, it was Christianity. Monotheism has as its first premise the idea of individuality, since if God, being One, must be individual, then it follows that men, created in God’s image, must be individuals also. Not only that, it implies that individual men and women have enormous eternal worth, being individual children of God created in His image. Jesus Christ, during His mortal ministry, made it very clear that He regarded every sinner, even the very worst, as having individual worth and potential. And He performed His miracles on individuals.

The idea of progress, not as self-evident, was planted with Jesus’ insistence that even the vilest of sinners can change their ways and improve their lives. The broader notion of progress took centuries to mature, but ultimately found expression in Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola’s timeless “Oration on the Dignity of Man,” in which were connected, possibly for the first time, the concepts of free will and progress. In the “Oration,” Pico represents God as saying to man:

The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have



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assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.

Concerning this divine endowment, Pico comments:

Oh unsurpassed generosity of God the Father, Oh wondrous and unsurpassable felicity of man, to whom it is granted to have what he chooses, to be what he wills to be! The brutes, from the moment of their birth, bring with them, as Lucilius says, “from their mother’s womb” all that they will ever possess. The highest spiritual beings were, from the very moment of creation, or soon thereafter, fixed in the mode of being which would be theirs through measureless eternities. But upon man, at the moment of his creation, God bestowed seeds pregnant with all possibilities, the germs of every form of life. Whichever of these a man shall cultivate, the same will mature and bear fruit in him.

In this, the “Manifesto of the Renaissance,” the full unvarnished character of individual man as a creature of free will and personal growth is validated by Christian theology, and ever since has been more or less assumed by most modern thinkers, from Locke and Jefferson down to modern times, who have defended and sought to improve Western civilization, with its privileging of the individual, individual rights, and human progress. The idea that individual human progress is a good thing, because God loves His children and wants their lot to improve, is no longer questioned in the West by reasonable people.

Individual rights, also given by God, are critical to individual progress. Individual rights form the framework of man’s moral agency — the ability for individuals to make the choices that allow progress to take place at all. Such rights include, but are certainly not limited to, the right to life, to individual liberty, to property, to independent thought and expression, and, in general, to the individual “pursuit of happiness” mentioned in the Declaration of Independence. Our entire social and moral fabric is bound up in the notion of such rights. We cannot imagine a social order not predicated on the interconnected notions of individuality, progress, and individual rights. But these are all primarily artifacts of Western Judeo-Christian civilization, and are by no means widely accepted or understood in other cultural frameworks.

Why Cultures Differ

The reason this is true is because many other great cultures, and the religious systems they arose from, either do not acknowledge the reality and worth of the individual, or else regard the collective to be more important than individuals. In the Buddhist world, for example, the situation of man within the cosmos is very different than it is in Judaism and Christianity. For the Buddhist, the ultimate goal of self-improvement is moksha (release from corporeal individuality and its associated cares) in order to achieve nirvana, a sort of extinction of individuality and merging with the great cosmic unity with which all enlightened souls (including the Buddha) have been merged. Buddhists take refuge in the “triple jewel”: the Buddha, dharma (the doctrine of Buddhism), and sangha, or “community of the Buddhist faithful.” To be sure, Buddhism teaches a wide array of important moral principles, such as the avoidance of hatred, bad language, and sexual misdeeds, while emphasizing the need for temperance



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and moderation in all things. Devout Buddhists and communities of the Buddhist faithful typically embody self-control and harmonious social interaction to a degree that makes many Westerners seem brutish and uninhibited by comparison. Typical of most Buddhist societies, for example, is an emphasis on respect that Westerners find difficult to emulate.

But because Buddhists picture the soul as (ultimately) a non-individual and the cosmos as a collectivist, undifferentiated whole, Buddhist culture has never emphasized individuality and individual achievement to anything approaching Western sensibilities. This is an indictment neither of Buddhism nor of Buddhist culture, with all of the great refinements and civilizing influences that they have conferred on the peoples of Asia. It is only an explanation of why that culture has not (so far) produced an event such as the Renaissance, or a peculiar cluster of talents similar to the American Founders.

The other great monotheistic religion, Islam, has unavoidably produced a culture predicated on individuality, since Muslims — even more so than Christians — lay emphasis on an absolute unitary God, so much so that even Trinitarian doctrine (the idea that God is three divinities — Father, Son, and Holy Ghost — in one) is offensive to them. Yet so far, Islam as a whole has not developed a robust tradition of progress and individual rights to complement the individual soul. This is because Islam in its more conservative guise tends to view the individual as a slave of God, rather than a child of God with the potential to mature and progress. To be sure, this view of individual man's relationship with divinity was widely held in the Christian world before the advent of the modern era. But the cultural consequence of the "slave of God" perspective is that the master-slave relationship is very prominent in many Muslim societies, especially where government is concerned. Thus, in much of the Islamic world, socialist collectivism is not especially popular (except in places like the Central Asian Muslim nations, which were subjugated by the Soviet empire) — but absolute dictatorships are common. Whether the comparatively benign rule of princes in Jordan, the UAE, or Saudi Arabia; the brutal totalitarianism of Syria's Assad regime; or military despots in the likes of the Sudan and Chad in Africa, government in much of the Islamic world very much embodies the cosmic metaphor of the individual utterly at the mercy of the whims of a single all-powerful sovereign. As a result, the Islamic world, its many considerable achievements in art and science notwithstanding, has yet to produce a John Locke or Thomas Jefferson.

No culture has ever remained truly unchanged. Progress, whether acknowledged or not, is a given in the human condition. Humanity has groped its way toward improvement for millennia, and the task is far from complete. Although different cultures and religions now show different levels of interest in the doctrines of ordered liberty and limited government, these ideas may eventually gain traction everywhere. After all, medieval Christian civilization did not produce a John Locke or a Thomas Jefferson either, nor could it until certain revolutionary ideas, like the need for individual progress, became popular and widespread enough. The same type of transformation could certainly take place in any other religion or culture; indeed, if the growth of freedom in such non-Western areas as South Korea, Japan, and Singapore is any evidence, it has already begun to happen.

As for those who are opposed to these principles — leftists, social-justice warriors, "progressives," and socialist radicals — we may expect them to continue their campaign against Western Christian civilization, latching onto any and all alternative creeds that have traditionally been less sympathetic to liberty and individualism. Although they are careful not to admit it, such people are consumed by the spirit of totalitarianism, the same malignancy that animated the Stalins, Hitlers, and Maos of the past. It



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is a lust to control, to mold, and to dictate to the hearts and minds of men, free from any competing power or allegiance. This is why such people instinctively hate Christianity and Western culture: These belief systems provide competition for the hearts and minds of men and women, encouraging them to think and act for themselves, to accept responsibility, and to seek to improve themselves and their surroundings. They also posit a power higher than the Almighty State and those who seek to wield its power. Surely a loving God, who seeks the best for all of his children, is to be preferred over any bleak, loveless, and oppressive man-made state!

We must understand that the preservation of our liberties and our continued progress depends in great measure upon the preservation of our Western cultural and religious heritage, and in promoting the ideas of individual liberty, progress, and God-given rights everywhere in the world.

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