

An Outline of European History

by John McKeefery

European culture rests on the dual foundations of Athens and Jerusalem, where 'Athens' symbolizes the pagan civilization of ancient Greece which became the culture of the Roman Empire – and thus of Europe – while 'Jerusalem' represents the Christian adaptation of Jewish monotheism and the Bible. The Athenian heritage was mostly lost in the Dark ages and rediscovered in the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century. Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, and survived the fall of Rome to provide the organizing force of European life in the Middle Ages. It exercised cultural dominance throughout Europe until the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although the monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church had already been shattered by the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.

At its height in the second century, the Roman Empire ruled over most of Europe and also northern Africa – the entire coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It spread classical Greek culture to the lands it ruled, insuring a unity of language and civilization over this area. It provided a standard of living that was to be lost in the Dark Ages that followed the decline of Rome, and not achieved again until the late eighteenth century. Where Edward Gibbon famously took six books to describe *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, I can allow no more than a paragraph.

Rome declined for a number of reasons still hotly debated by historians today. In the fourth century, its empire was divided into two parts, and Christianity became the state religion. The emperor Constantine, who made these historic changes, left Rome as the capital of the western empire and founded the new city of Constantinople (the modern city of Istanbul) as his eastern capital. Meanwhile, the empire had been, and continued to be, progressively weakened until it could no longer defend its borders against the intrusions of barbarian tribes. Ultimately, the barbarian chieftains became so militarily successful that one of them became king in Italy. His decision (in 476) to rule without the imperial crown meant “the fall of Rome” in the West. The eastern half of the empire would survive until 1453. Indeed, in the sixth century, the eastern emperor Justinian briefly re-conquered the western territories. However, his successors were not able to maintain his conquests. When militant Islam conquered much of Europe in the seventh and eighth centuries, all realistic hopes of restoring the old empire were ended.

In this way the stage was set for Europe's gradual decline into barbarism – the 'Dark Ages' as we call them. They lasted roughly

until the year 1000 when a noticeable revival began in northern Europe. Before that time, the only functional remnants of the old empire had been the hierarchical organization of the Church, and the preservation of much classical thought and literature by Muslim scholarship. It was partly through Western contact with that scholarship (largely in Moorish Spain) that it became possible to begin to revive learning and to construct a new 'medieval' civilization in Europe. This civilization reached its height in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with a revival of trade and commerce, the medieval philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and others at the University of Paris, the construction of the great Gothic cathedrals, and (what we call) the Crusades – a series of military efforts to re-conquer the holy lands from Islamic rule.

In Italy, in the fifteenth century, there occurred a tremendous rediscovery of the world of classical civilization, with an enthusiastic exploration of the literature, art and way of life of Greece and Rome. This attempt to reclaim and emulate ancient culture is known as the Renaissance; and it established a tradition that permeated art, architecture and Western thought until the beginning of the twentieth century. The architecture of Washington, DC is but one example of its pervasive influence.

In religion, what we now know as Roman Catholicism totally dominated all of European culture until Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. This theological controversy inspired a century of brutal religious warfare. The unity of 'Christendom' in Europe was broken; even so, the cultural hegemony of Christianity remained intact until the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Before that time, neither Protestants nor Catholics believed in what we now call 'freedom of conscience.' Neither side conceived that (what they saw as) error could have 'human rights,' and both persecuted those that they regarded as heretics.

The great scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries culminated in a movement known as the Enlightenment – the first rival creed to challenge the cultural dominance of Christianity. It was mostly deist, sometimes frankly atheistic, and it was often hostile to the clergy and to established religious organization, though not necessarily to belief in God. It espoused an alternate faith in human reason, left free to explore all areas of thought and expression. It opened a new faith in ongoing Progress through scientific discovery and unfettered rational inquiry.

I began by saying that our contemporary culture rests on two foundations: ancient Greek culture and Judaeo-Christianity. I would

now add a third element – that of the Enlightenment, modern science, and the religion of Progress. It is arguable that the cultural task of our time is the forging of a new synthesis satisfactorily weaving together all three of these streams of cultural heritage. We can choose instead to engage in dogmatic culture wars if we wish, but I believe that most of us share at least some of the values of all three traditions.