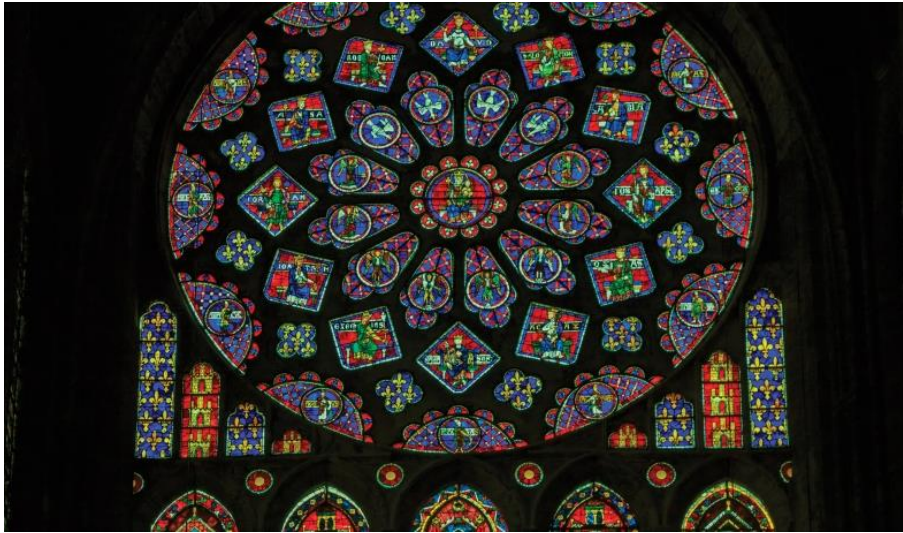


The Difference Christianity Made

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Below: Rose window in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Chartres (Louise Heusinkveld/Getty images)



**Our world
would be
unthinkable
without the
Bible and its
interpreters**

How did Christianity shape the civilization of the West? Let me count (some of) the ways, with an assist at several points from British intellectual historian Larry Siedentop.

The story of Jesus had an immense impact in forming “the West.” Before Jesus, the family, the primary unit of social and personal identity, was the locus of immortality: One “lived on” in one’s family. In Jesus, crucified and raised from the dead, the individual became the locus of immortality. That gave new meaning to “the individual,” who was now invested with a previously unimaginable dignity.

Saint Paul drew out some of the implications of this in teaching that, among paleo-Christians, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for all are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Before Jesus and Paul, the basic assumption governing society was of fixed, unchangeable, or “natural” human *inequality*. By stressing the equality of all in Christ, Christianity underwrote the fundamental norm of the equality of all in the modern West. This, in turn, led to a new sense of justice: Justice must reflect moral equality rather than natural inequality.

Christianity desacralized the state, a process that began with Christ’s injunction to render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s (Matthew 22:15–21). If there are things of God’s that are not Caesar’s, Caesar is not God. If Caesar is not God, Caesar is not omnipotent, and his power is limited. If Caesar’s power is limited, Caesar’s remit does not run into the sanctuary of human conscience, nor does it control all human relationships. There is no “West,” there is no democratic project, if the state remains sacred and if the state imagines itself omniscient. Christianity desacralized and thereby limited the state; Christian conviction thus opened the social space for what we now call “civil society.”

Christianity redefined “heroism” and the human capacity for heroic virtue. Before the Christian martyrs, heroism was understood as an aristocratic virtue — think of Odysseus — and the typical classical hero was an aristocrat from a leading family: a strong and wily man, successful in human and material terms. The Christian martyrs changed all that. Martyr-heroes came from every social class, including the slave class. They were women as well as men (as the Roman canon of the Catholic Mass reminds us to this

day). Martyr-heroes democratized heroism — their witness was available to everyone, and their sacrifice embodied a new form of self-respect that was not a function of class or sex.

The ancient world was smitten with physical perfection and found a model of it in athletes, who sought glory and acclaim from vast crowds in stadiums. The Christian monks of the East offered a different kind of grace and glory: the conquest of the will, in an “arena” in which the individual heard the voice of God, not the cheers of crowds. Another layer of human dignity and capacity was thereby uncovered: the human capacity for interiority, for the contemplative, for an encounter with ultimate truths and ultimate reality *inside* the human person.

The Christian monks of Europe gave the West new forms of human association — what we now call “voluntary associations” — and the first experiments in large-scale democratic self-governance. The Benedictine formula *Ora et labora* also gave a new dignity to work, which had previously been understood as something servile, the province of slaves. Work, the monks insisted, had dignity; working for one’s living was a mark of self-respect. Further, the process of electing abbots by universal suffrage within Benedictine monasteries offered the world a new model of authority, its source, and its exercise. Western monasticism thus changed ideas of law and obedience to law, which were not matters of unexamined custom or brute force: Law and obedience became associated with conscience, individual consent, and a freely associated community’s discernment of its own needs in terms of leadership.

Many of these developments received a first comprehensive articulation in the work of Saint Augustine. Augustine’s *Confessions* was the first autobiography in the modern sense of the term; his story of personal wrestling with the truth of things opened up new depths of self-consciousness and self-examination that would prove crucial in forming Western civilization and its unique ability to be self-critical — a capacity essential to democracy and science. Then there was Augustine’s analysis of the human condition in *The City of God*, which helped strengthen the Western understanding that it is possible to be oriented to a transcendent world and responsible to transcendent truths while being engaged in this world.

Christianity reshaped legal practice and bent it in the direction we recognize today in the democratic West. By insisting on verdicts based on evidence rather than on physical tests or the testimony of relatives, first-millennium church councils such as several of the Councils of Toledo redefined criminal law in ways that point toward the norms of justice and the concepts of jurisprudence we expect in 21st-century democratic societies.

First-millennium church councils also condemned the notion that the natural world was the dwelling of spirits or demigods. This theological judgment had important implications for the development of science. If the natural world is not mysteriously ordered (and disordered) by various supernatural powers but behaves according to its own natural laws, then it is open to rigorous empirical examination: the kind of examination that made possible what would later be known as the scientific method. (Some may find it curious that two of the most consequential scientific ideas of recent centuries — modern genetic theory, and the big-bang theory of the origins of the universe — began with the work of Catholic priests: the Czech Augustinian monk Gregor Mendel and the Belgian Georges Lemaître. Yet there is nothing odd at all about that. Far from being the enemy of science — a canard promoted by many black legends — Christianity helped make what we know as “science” possible by desacralizing the natural world.)

The resolution of the eleventh- and twelfth-century investiture controversy over the appointment of bishops — symbolized by Pope Gregory VII’s confrontation with King Henry IV in the snow at Canossa

— confirmed the church’s right to govern itself and to make public pronouncements on moral issues. This lengthy affair injected an anti-totalitarian antibody into the Western civilizational bloodstream, thus helping open the historical path to limited government, and ultimately toward republican forms of self-government.

And then there was one of Christianity’s great contributions to the world of learning: the university. The university as we know it is the child of the Catholic Church. In the medieval universities established in Paris, Bologna, Oxford, Kraków, and Prague, the practice of disciplined public debate on matters of great consequence took root in the civilizational soil of the West, with profound implications for Western culture and for democratic public life.

The list could be extended farther and deeper but perhaps the essential point is now clear: The Christian roots of the Western democratic project are deep, and deeply influential.

Is it possible to imagine the emergence of democracy as the predominant form of government in the West without the Christian conviction that all human beings are responsible moral agents, capable of virtue?

Could the democratic West as we know it have emerged without the Christian desacralization of the state and the Christian insistence on the independence of the church, or the Christian concept of the universal applicability of rational norms of justice, or the Christian affirmation of voluntary, self-governing, free associations, or the Christian habit of rigorous self-examination?

In broader civilizational terms:

Is it possible to imagine modern Western economies without the Christian affirmation of the dignity of work and workers?

Is it possible to imagine modern science without the Christian desacralization of nature?

It is true that Christian ideas took centuries to work their way into the texture of Western society, including its politics. It is also true that these ideas were controversial, just as it is true that, at particular moments in history, the church pushed back against the public implications of some of its own most powerful convictions.

But is it possible to imagine what we know as “the West” and “democracy” today without these biblically rooted ideas, as they were developed in Christianity? It seems very unlikely. The democratic project as we know it did not develop in Hindu, Mogul, Confucian, or African cultures, nor had it developed in the cultures Europeans found in the Western Hemisphere in the 16th century. The West — its science, its economics, and its democratic project — developed in cultural soil enriched by biblical and Christian ideas, convictions, modes of life, and practices.

And that, as Marxists used to say, “is not an accident.”

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