

Western Culture,  
European Civilization:  
An Italian Perspective

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Max Weber, a founder of modern sociology, asks, “what combination of circumstances” is responsible for the fact “that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only,” we find ideas and inventions “having universal significance and value”? At question here is a list of diverse, even opposing, ideas: capitalism, communism, socialism; democracy as majority rule, anti-democracy protecting minority groups from majority rule; modern science; liberalism; separation of society and government, separation of church and state, separation of religion and church; the rule of law; the welfare state; the free market; universal conventions, declarations, and bills of rights.

The universal features of the West have universal value; the universal institutions of the West have intrinsic value to all people, in all cultures, ages, religions, civilizations, and languages. The universality of Western culture offers something to all humans: timeless truths that improve one’s circumstances.

A concrete example: the last century has seen Western nations experimenting with different approaches to the “politics of the Middle East.” There has been debate about the attempt to “export democracy,” and three positions have emerged. First, some say the attempt it is premature, because the social, economic, legal, and institutional conditions of those countries are still undeveloped. Second, some say that the attempt is unilateral, because it doesn’t account for the fact that the institutions typical of democracy – the vote, equality, laws, parliaments, courts, etc. – inevitably undergo modifications when they are grafter to different cultures (e.g., from England to India, or from France to Algeria). Third, some say that the attempt is correct. Although these three positions are radically different, they highlight one fact: exporting democracy respects the legitimacy and worth of human life – and of different forms of life – and is ultimately the only peaceful and non-violent approach to the violent and war-torn relationship between the West and this region.

We reject Nazism, fascism, communism, racism, anti-Semitism, and fanaticism not because they conflict with some logical theorem, or because they are empirically or

scientifically false, but because they offend our consciences, contradict our deep intuitions about human, and violate our fundamental values. We reject them, in other words, for practical rather than theoretical reasons.

The French political scientist, Olivier Roy, wrote, “political Islam cannot resist the test of power ... it has been transformed into a neo-fundamentalism that cares only about re-establishing Islamic law, the *sharia*, without inventing new political forms.” He pointed out that Islam has not produced its own political modern, economic system, autonomous public institutions, divisions between the family and the state, equal rights for women, or community of states founded on anything except religion; he considered Islam a failure. The Islamic culture “has a closed door, the door of revolution and the Islamic state.”

Can Oliver Roy’s controversial view be correct? How should we evaluate this French political scientist’s understanding?

It is important to note that, if we argue that the model of Western democratic institutions and rights is better than the Islamic model, this does not imply taking any particular course of action. One can still tolerate Islam, respect Islam, dialogue with Islam, or ignore Islam, obstruct Islam, clash with Islam. A variety of stance is possible.

There is a common error in thinking that if a person maintains that the West is better than Islam – i.e., that democracy is better than pure authoritarianism; that constitutional rights are better than *sharia*; that a representative debate is better than a *sura*; that a civil society is better than a *ummah*; a sentence by an independent impartial tribune is better than a *fatwa*; citizenship is better than *dhimma* – then a person *ought* to clash with Islam. It is an error to assume that simply because Western free human dignity is better than Islamic subjugation, one ought to fight against Islam.

Comparison does not necessarily give rise to conflict. There are valid reasons for comparing and judging institutions, principles, and values. If someone responds with conflict to an offer to dialogue, it becomes clear that this is an adversary relationship. If we affirm the principles of tolerant, respectful, peaceful coexistence, but someone refuses to reciprocate these principles and declares hostility and *jihad* against us, we must acknowledge that this person has chosen to become our adversary.

Because there is a plurality of values, because it is impossible for all values to coexist, the judgment of cultures and civilizations constitutes a valid mode of inquiry. Because there simply are many different values, sets of values – such as cultures and civilizations – must be judged by comparison to one another.

The only thing required is that the members of two societies wish to enter into a dialogue and submit to each other's criticism. In the midst, or at the conclusion, of a dialogue, one interlocutor will run into difficulty defending himself to the other. This does not mean that the thesis of the latter will automatically be true. However, it will stand up to criticism, objections, and denials. This is supported by a general trend of immigration and emigration from the one society toward the other.

A German university professor has written, "relativism has become a religion for some people ... the power of Christianity ... consisted in its synthesis of reason, faith, and life." Why has this synthesis been forgotten? This unique mixture, which allowed for creativity and freedom, caused science and art to flourish, which did not happen in other cultures. Why is the bond between the Enlightenment and faith been forgotten? Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu strongly rejected atheism; Isaac Newton, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Rene Descartes clearly stated their Christian faith; even the father of modern chemistry, Robert Boyle, saw his "ideal gas law" (now called "Boyle's law") as evidence of Intelligent Design.

This university professor in Germany lists two questions above. They are central to understanding the situation of our culture today. What has changed? Collectively, we have forgotten the logical concepts of foundations, proofs, justifications, and "good reasons."

The hope for regaining a more rational view of the world begins with remembering that beyond huge numbers of opinions and subjective beliefs, there is a concrete and stable truth. Scientists, mathematicians, and logicians point to the fact that there is basic level of truth – the facts, the way things really are – valid and binding within history itself, independent of any human belief or opinion, even independent of the existence of human beings at all. The existence of objective truth is the foundation of democracy, because it is the reality that is equally true for all people – whether or not they know it.

What all human beings seek – in any culture – is the truth, not "my truth" or "what is true for me," but what is equally true for all people. The basis for democracy not only the objective truth about equality, but truths which are equally true for all people, truths about dignity, respect, and the value of every individual human life.

The purpose of mutual dialogue, then, is twofold: first, to communicate and foster mutual understanding, fostering coexistence, tolerance, and respect among people of various religions and creeds; second, to spread a message, persuading. Dialogue is the rational and civil way to spread a message, unlike the swords of Mohammed's followers; being civil, it spreads civility, not conflict.