

Our Western Heritage: An Interview with Robert George

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Editor's Note: *Robert George, well known to readers of Academic Questions, holds Princeton's celebrated McCormick Chair in Jurisprudence and is the founding director of the James Madison Program. He has served on the President's Council on Bioethics and as a presidential appointee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. He is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. His publications include In Defense of Natural Law (Oxford University Press, 1999), Making Men Moral: Civil Liberties and Public Morality (Oxford University Press, 2001), and The Clash of Orthodoxies: Law, Religion and Morality in Crisis (ISI, 2002), as well as numerous scholarly articles and reviews in such journals as the Harvard Law Review, the Yale Law Journal, the Columbia Law Review, the American Journal of Jurisprudence, and the Review of Politics. Prof. George is a recipient of many honors and awards, including the Presidential Citizens Medal, the Sidney Hook Memorial Award of the National Association of Scholars, and the Stanley Kelley, Jr., Teaching Award from Princeton's Department of Politics. For the record, he is also a finger style guitarist and bluegrass banjo player.*

Iannone: Why is Western Civilization worth studying in your view?

George: By any standard of measure, the intellectual, moral, religious, political, economic, scientific, technological, artistic, architectural, and literary achievements of the West are extraordinary. It would be foolish not to study them,

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examine their roots, and explore the complex relationships among them, such as the relationship between Western religious ideas and the development of science. Our students are—as we ourselves are—inheritors of these achievements. Their culture—and, thus, their lives—have been shaped by them. They *deserve* to understand them. And if they are to maintain all that is worth maintaining, and reform what needs reforming, and pass along to their own children a vibrant and healthy culture, they *need* to understand them.

***Iannone:* What about Western Civilization is unique?**

George: Science as we know it could not have developed outside of the West. It is a great gift of the West to the entire world. Moreover, ideas of natural law, republican government, civil rights and liberties, and the dignity, inviolability, and fundamental freedom of the individual are fundamentally Western insights. These, too, are gifts to the world. Many of these insights were hard-won. Some might yet be lost. Certainly, they have not always been honored, or fully respected, by the people of the West or their political, religious, and cultural institutions. Still, they are exceptional achievements.

***Iannone:* How important are Judaism and Christianity and the moral values they foster to the maintenance of Western Civilization? Are there other essential elements of Western thought that should be part of any curriculum—certain books, ideas, developments?**

George: If there were no Judaism, there would be no Christianity. There is a profound sense in which Christianity is the “other” Jewish religion emerging from the transformations in Jewish faith and practice that resulted from the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem. If there were no Christianity, there would be no Western civilization. Most of the great achievements of the modern West were underwritten by Christian, and therefore also by Jewish, religious and philosophical and moral ideas. Of course, pre-Christian Greek and Roman thought, many of the aspects of which were taken up into Christian thought, were also profoundly important. Can these achievements be maintained if Jewish and Christian faith collapses in the West? Can Western ideals and institutions flourish when utterly severed from their

religious roots? Frankly, I doubt it. But it appears that we will know for sure before too long. Much of Europe today is engaged in a vast experiment that will tell us whether cultural and political achievements whose historical roots are in religion can be sustained and nurtured in a cultural and political milieu of extreme secularism.

***Iannone:* How do the more secular ideas of the Enlightenment fit into the foundations of the West? Is the West a balance of the two elements, religious and secular?**

George: Certainly Enlightenment thinkers made important contributions to the Western tradition, particularly in the advancement of personal and political liberty. The “secularism” of the Enlightenment is, however, frequently exaggerated. First, it is worth noting that there was no single Enlightenment, but several different Enlightenments. Some Enlightenment, or proto-Enlightenment thinkers—especially among the French—were hostile to Christianity and religion generally; others were not. Some Enlightenments were infected with anti-religious zealotry—again, the French Enlightenment especially—others, such as the Scottish Enlightenment, much less so.

Second, there were important Enlightenment figures who developed and built on the classic Christian understanding of a legitimate realm of the secular—an understanding that Christians have always found rooted in Christ’s command to render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s. Of course, Christianity is opposed, as it should and must be opposed, to *secularism*, as an anti-religious ideology that seeks to drive religion from the public sphere and, in its more radical forms, to eliminate religious faith altogether. Christianity does not, however, oppose the idea of the *secular* or the idea of a legitimate secular domain. Indeed, Christianity can claim the lion’s share of the credit for inventing it.

Moreover, classic Christianity is not fideistic. It holds, rather, that faith and reason are mutually supportive and equally necessary to a rich and accurate understanding of our condition as human persons. In our own time, this conviction was reaffirmed by Pope John Paul II in the opening sentence of his great encyclical on the relationship of faith and reason, *Fides et Ratio*. There, the late pontiff said that “faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit ascends to contemplation

of truth.” This is entirely compatible with what is noblest and best in Enlightenment thought.

***Iannone:* You have written of the liberal arts as enabling the student to gain self-mastery? Why is that important?**

George: Self-mastery is important because it is a basic, irreducible dimension of the well-being and fulfillment of rational creatures—and, as Aristotle taught, we human beings are just that: creatures whose nature is a rational nature. Moreover, self-mastery—the capacity to exercise rational control over one’s emotions, passions, and desires and direct them toward good and upright ends—is indispensable to the project of self-government. If we believe in republican democracy, as we should; if we believe in the ideal of free persons, who participate as equal citizens in the project of self-government, as we should; if we believe in the dignity and rights of the individual in a regime of ordered liberty, as we should; then we must dedicate ourselves to educating young people for self-mastery. A political regime of self-government can only be sustained among people who are capable of governing themselves. People incapable of self-mastery will quickly prove to be unfit for self-government.

***Iannone:* The idea of self-mastery seems so opposite of everything that is promulgated today—being true to ourselves, satisfying our desires, if it feels good do it. Do you think self-mastery has appeal for most of today’s students, cultivated so much to the opposite? After all, what you might call slavery to the self many call freedom and liberation.**

George: Well, it is Plato and Aristotle versus Charlie Sheen and Lady Gaga, isn’t it? And the old Greeks aren’t given equal time on MTV and E! But, look, as a teacher, I have faith in our young people. They are capable of rising to meet great challenges, if only we, their elders, are willing to issue those challenges and point the way. Fundamentally, the problem is not with their generation, it is with ours. It was our generation that lost faith, not only faith in God, in any meaningful sense, but faith in man—in reason, in beauty, in truth, in moral, aesthetic, and intellectual standards of any type, in the very

ideas of good and evil, right and wrong. It was ours that dubbed ourselves the “Me Generation,” and proclaimed the imbecilic doctrine of “if it feels good, do it.” We are the generation that produced widespread slavery to “recreational” drugs, a sexual revolution that has had devastating consequences for millions of children—especially in the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of our society—and the collapse of intellectual standards.

True, the result is a culture in which young people have been cultivated to identify “authenticity” with acting on one’s feelings and desires, whatever they happen to be. But that is not set in stone. We really can challenge our children and our students to have higher aspirations and to lead richer, nobler lives. Young people in every generation are naturally idealistic. They are open to prophetic voices that challenge the moral-cultural status quo. They are capable of being inspired. It’s just a matter of doing it. So I have an idea: let’s do it.

***Iannone:* What particularly about study of the past can counter the debased form of freedom or misconception of freedom popular today?**

George: I believe in going forward with all cylinders firing. Expose students to the thought of the Greek philosophers and Roman jurists. Make sure they know all about the Hebrew prophets and the Christian saints. Teach them about the philosophical and theological ideas that made possible the emergence of modern science and the development of republican democracy. For heaven’s sake, introduce them to Shakespeare and Bach and let them see why Snoop Dogg and Hank Williams, much as I love him, don’t represent quite the same level of achievement.

***Iannone:* Do you see the freedom and self-mastery this study brings as something that goes beyond the individual to be of benefit to society, or is it mainly about the individual?**

George: The last man on earth, living out his remaining days with no hope of interaction with another human being, would still do well to strive for self-mastery. His nature would remain a human nature, a rational nature. His flourishing would still require developing his own character in a way that would place reason in control of passion or desire. He would not be morally free to live

the life of a brute animal. He would be a fool if he did so. But, of course, none of us is that man. All of us are members of various communities—the community of a family, the community of a faith, the community of a locality and a nation. For those communities to flourish, for them to have integrity, their members must be people who are masters of themselves. Someone who imagines that there can be well-integrated communities composed of poorly integrated individuals imagines (to borrow words from Thomas Jefferson) “what never was and never will be.” Communities pay a heavy price for the lack of self-discipline, self-control, and self-mastery among their members. This is a proposition for which ample empirical data is available, alas.

Iannone: Do you see a study of Western Civilization enabling students to realize what is at stake in upholding the West and defending it from those who would destroy it?

George: In my experience as a teacher—and as a student myself—I find that the more deeply people understand Western civilization and its achievements, the more profoundly they appreciate them. So, it seems to me, in the face of contemporary challenges to Western ideals and institutions, there is nothing more urgent than deepening the understanding of our people of the traditions of faith, thought, and social and political life that made the West. Does this mean that we should neglect the study of non-Western traditions or denigrate their achievements? No. That would be a decidedly un-Western thing to do, since a cardinal tenet of Western philosophy is to embrace truth and value wherever they are to be found. We mustn't fear teaching our young people about other cultures, but we should not disdain to teach them about their own.

Iannone: What would you say are outstanding flaws or shortcomings in Western thought that need corrective, perhaps from the study of other cultures or sources?

George: It is a tenet of Western thought that the whole world—indeed, the whole of reality—is to be explored, investigated, reflected about, and

to the maximum possible extent understood. Furthermore, wisdom is to be cherished, no matter its source. That is why ethnocentrism and chauvinism are antithetical to the Western tradition, though there are certainly people in the West who have fallen into these errors. And so, as recent popes, among others, have taught, there is much to be gained from engagement with Islam, for example, and the great religions of the East, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. The West is truer to itself when it is open to such engagement.

***Iannone:* We think of American values and by extension Western values as universal. But is there a way to maintain our own cultural heritage while still being open to the entire world?**

George: Well, yes, we do believe that our values are universal values. We do not suppose, for example, that the principle of the profound, inherent, and equal dignity of each and every member of the human family is true in Utica but not in Uganda. We believe it is true always and everywhere, and that all people and all peoples are bound under the moral law to honor the principle in the design of their political and social institutions and in the practices of their governments and societies. So we reject any form of “multiculturalism” that regards opposition to slavery, for example, or the reduction of women to the status of sexual objects, as mere local Western values that do not hold in non-Western societies or morally bind non-Western governments. But that does not mean that non-Western societies must be made to look just like Western ones or even that we should wish that they did. Our most basic values are universal; but many of our institutions and practices are not. There is vast room for cultural variety reflecting different histories, religious and other traditions, prudential judgments, and even preferences. Between moral relativism, which is contemptible, and chauvinism, which is appalling, there is a sensible and rationally completely defensible position that distinguishes between universal—and fundamental—principles of right and wrong, justice and injustice, and non-basic matters on which a diversity of cultural practices is to be expected, accepted, and, in many cases, celebrated.

Iannone: And what about our own culture? Do we have a right to preserve it as the means through which the universal principles are realized in our present situation? Some cultures may not be compatible with our own; Islam permits polygamy, for example, as part of the religion itself. Can our culture tolerate polygamy, whether officially or unofficially recognized? Are there times when we would have to say that theoretically the universal values hold, but not every culture is able to profess them at present to the same level as ours and that therefore their absorption into the West is problematic?

George: Yes, of course we have the right to protect the principles and institutions we believe serve the dignity of the human person and the causes of justice and the common good. If we judge, as we should, that marriage is the exclusive conjugal union of one man and one woman, and that the institution of marriage is the foundational unit of society whose role is indispensable to the transmission of core values and virtues, then we must fight off efforts to redefine marriage as something that it isn't or weaken it in any way. We certainly should not recognize polygamous or polyamorous sexual partnerships as marriages. Does the rejection of polygamy mean that Muslims, whose religion accepts the practice, cannot be good citizens? I think not. Vast numbers of Muslims in America are already proving themselves to be good citizens—excellent citizens. As the Muslim scholar Hamza Yusuf has noted, no Muslim is required to practice polygamy or advocate laws permitting it, and Muslims are bound by Islamic teaching to respect the laws of the communities in which they dwell.

It is worth noting that there was a time not long ago when Catholics in America were held in suspicion because their religion did not profess a robust doctrine of religious freedom. This was understandable on both ends. The teachings of nineteenth-century popes included statements about religious freedom, as well as democracy itself, that made Protestant Americans very nervous about their Catholic neighbors. On the Catholic side, the Church's understanding of the meaning of democracy and religious freedom had been shaped not by the American experience, but by the ideology and practices of the French revolutionaries. The wonderful thing is that American Catholics—and others, including Catholics living under atheistic tyranny in Soviet puppet states—were able eventually to persuade their mainly Western European church leaders that embracing a robust conception of democracy and religious freedom would not entail accepting such French Revolutionary ideas as religious indifferentism or

relativism, or the notion that religious vows don't bind, or that it is immoral to take them, or the complete subservience of the Church to the state. Once that happened, the Church became a powerful force for democracy and religious freedom across the globe.

Iannone: As a follow-up, could there be a difference between those who have fallen into ethnocentrism and chauvinism, as you say above, and those who conscientiously believe we can't be so open as to allow our principles and the culture that transmits them to be overtaken by those who think and practice very differently, who can use our openness to undermine us?

George: Absolutely. But that means vigilance not only against those who would undermine our principles and institutions in the name of religion, but also against those who would undermine them in the name of secularist, including liberal secularist, beliefs.

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