



# THE LEGEND OF THE CHRISTIAN WESTERN WORLD



## *Introduction*

In discussions about Europe, its self-image and its values, one often hears the expression “Christian-Western”. For example, the former Bavarian governor Edmund Stoiber declared “We want the Christian-Western culture to remain dominant and not dissolve in a multicultural mishmash”. Similar statements can be heard in political circles the length and breadth of the land.

A few well-meaning people like to draw attention, in this connection, to Europe’s “Judeo-Christian heritage”. In doing so, however, they are placing a hyphen in a sensitive place: Most Jews vehemently reject being subsumed into a “Judeo-Christian culture”. Against the backdrop of the Christian hatred of the Jews, which over the centuries has led to countless Pogroms, this is entirely understandable.

Cultural researchers, philosophers, historians of antiquity and classical philologists criticise the “Christian-Western perception of history”, above

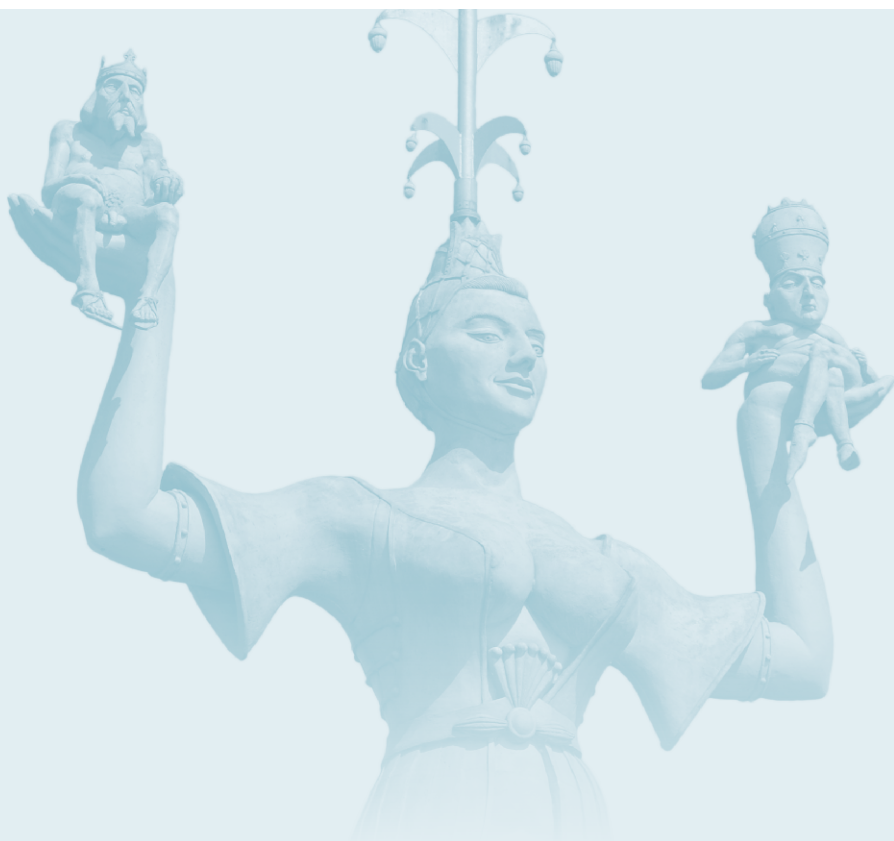
all, because it ignores the decisive contribution of the ancient world. Europe, they explain, with its democratic system and its culture, would not be conceivable without Athens and Rome.

Furthermore, one should not overlook the fact that Europe’s cultural landscape has been decisively influenced by the Islamic-Arabic civilization that flourished between the 8th and the 14th century.

Greek, Roman, Christian, Jewish, Islamic: Obviously there are still a few things to be straightened out! And so far we haven’t even mentioned the Enlightenment, with its important political and humanitarian stimuli.

So let’s cast a glance at the cultural history of Europe:

Is it really thanks to Christianity that today we Western Europeans live in one of the most peaceful and stable regions that human history has ever known?



The “Imperia” in the harbour of Konstanz commemorates the Council of Constance (1414-1418), at which not only many clerics and princes were present, but also a large number of prostitutes. This statue, by the renowned German sculptor Peter Lenk, is of a courtesan holding, in her two raised hands, representatives of the power-alliance of the time: the Emperor and the Pope. Both are naked but bearing the insignia of their authority. Church spokesmen and conservative politicians put up vehement resistance to this memorial, which was erected in 1993. But their protests were in vain: Today the “Imperia” is not only a major tourist attraction, it is even considered an emblem of the town of Konstanz.



## Classical Antiquity

The cradle of “Western culture” is not to be found in Bethlehem, but on the Acropolis. It all begins here: Creative imagination, the idea of “beauty”, the expansion of the mind, the search for moral perfection. Here, in the 5th century BC, the word of the citizen and the language of reason are replacing the pronouncements of oracles and fortune-tellers.

It is here too that the decision is made to grant all recognized citizens a democratic voice; theatres are founded and incomparably beautiful works of classical art are created. Astronomy and cosmology, medicine and pharmacology, politics and philology – all these bear Greek names. No faculty of humanities or natural sciences, and no art school, fails to draw upon this Greek legacy.

Rome supplements the Greek culture, introduces order, and gives the people justice and laws, thermal baths and theatre, highways and cities.

Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, studying medicine without Latin is unthinkable and the *Codex Iustinianus* continues to accompany every law student. Today’s concepts of “humanism” and “human dignity” also have their origin in Roman culture, for example with Cicero, who in the first century BC develops the notion of “*humanitas*”.

To be sure: there is no reason to idealize either ancient Greece or ancient Rome. They are societies that keep slaves, wage numerous wars and are frequently ruled by despots. But for their times, they are remarkably progressive in many ways, and they remain an influence on style up to this day. This mixture of Greek high culture and Roman administrative and engineering talent we know as the “culture of Classical Antiquity”. Its paramount importance for the Western world is undisputed. It is the fundament upon which Europe rests.

## The State Church

In the year 380, Emperor Theodosius effects a *tabula rasa*. With the Edict of Thessalonica, *Cunctos populos*, he forbids all pagan religions and also represses the “heretics”, the various forms of Christianity that deviate from Catholicism: “We authorize the followers of this law to assume the title of Catholic Christians; but as for the others, since, in our judgment they are foolish madmen, we decree that they shall be branded with the ignominious name of heretics”.

For the first time in Graeco-Roman history, *monotheism*, with its inherent characteristic of intolerance towards other religious beliefs, becomes the guiding principle for State conduct. The year 380 marks a change in paradigm from the polytheistic, multicultural way of thinking to a monotheistic, monothematic attitude.

The *Interpretatio Graeca*, the habit of ancient Greek authors of identifying unfamiliar deities of other cultures with the Greek gods, and the *Religio licita*, the Roman recognition of Jewish, Christian and other forms of belief, are suspended. 800 years of religious harmony, during which everyone was free to seek and find their own heaven, are over.

The *Cunctos populos* marks the beginning of the disempowerment of the State. The Emperor surrenders the role of *Pontifex maximus* – the highest priest and supervisor of all sacral matters – and transfers the entitlement to the Pope. The State subjugates itself to religion and the properties of the heathen temples fall to the Church. The antique philosophical- and liberal-arts-oriented culture is replaced by a culture of dogmatism, able to assert itself because of the alliance between religion and State power.





## Collapse

The henceforth dominant focus on the afterlife and the Church's authoritarian claims to the truth together paralyse creativity and research, education and science. The once free spirit withdraws behind the monastery walls, in the spirit of the Church. Other areas of culture such as public schools and libraries, philosophical academies, theatres and thermal baths fall into disuse. The same is true of the network of Roman roads and the water supply.

Without public schools and libraries, without theatres and sewers, without thermal baths and public forums, the cities begin to crumble. Their culture collapses and they descend into dirt and decay.

The once diverse, multi-lingual and culturally aware State is replaced by a cult of faith. A culture that for a thousand years allowed sexuality to take its natural course, that sculpted beauty in marble, disintegrates into dismal darkness. The mediaeval person's hope of a "good life" dwindles under the onslaught of a demoralising doctrine of original sin. Augustine (354–430), considered the most important proponent of this doctrine, held that humankind is but a heap of sinners, a *massa damnata*.

During the death throes of reason and of its schools and academies, it takes no more than a generation for the language to become corrupted. Eventually only a few individuals can still read and write. Education has been demolished.

## Charles the Great and the Monastic Culture

The emperor Charles "the Great" does little to stop the decline. His worldview is exclusively that of fundamental Catholicism and even anticipates elements of authoritarian Islamism. Charles wages war for 40 years, and commands, under the threat of physical punishment, that every person must know the essential texts of the Church. Women who do not know the Lord's Prayer, for example, are liable to be whipped. The former German president Roman Herzog reminds historians: "It would not be honest ... to conceal that he only attained his goals through a sea of blood, sweat and tears."

Charles' views are in stark contrast to everything that gives Europe profile and colour. In his view "science" is not for research and is neither innovative nor profound. Charles did not found a single public school, nor did he support any scholarly discipline except theology. He opened no new theatres, and financed no new public libraries. Citizens empty sewage onto the streets, Paris becomes

a rubbish dump, and the network of highways inherited from the Romans falls into disrepair. Charles gives the bishops and the monasteries huge tracts of land, whilst throughout the realm there is a lack of funding and initiative. When anything is left over, it flows either into the Church or into wars. The regime brings ruin upon the land.

The monastery schools, much vaunted in the literature, are religious schools for a select minority whose curricula focus on the message of salvation. They are not interested in educating the populace, nor in passing down the knowledge of antiquity. In methodology, one-sidedness, and definition of learning objective, they can be compared with party and Koran schools; and they fail to reach 95% of the population. Under Charles the Great, writes the historian Karl Lambrecht, there was never any "intellectual elevation of the population". Thus the Franks, illiterate when Charles comes to power, are no better off as his era comes to a close.





## *The Arabic High Culture*

In parallel with the decline of the North, Southern Europe sees the rise – like the Phoenix out of the ashes – of the Islamic-Arabic culture. Caliphs and Arabic nobles admire the sciences of ancient Greece; they integrate Syrian, Persian, Indian and Asian contributions, compile and extend this knowledge, and thus produce a high culture that is vastly superior to any other culture of the Middle Ages.

The Arabic cities soar to cultural heights, and Arabic becomes the language of science. Nowhere in Europe can one at this time find more taste, more refinement, more scholarship, more tolerance and freedom than in Baghdad, Damascus, and the cities of al-Andalus. Cordoba is considered “the ornament of the world”, Baghdad as a worldwide “haven of wisdom”. In Christian Europe at this time, prayers and penance are the recommended defence against thunder and lightning, hunger and epidemics. The so-called “Western values” are, at this time, far more “Eastern values”.

From the 13th century, the antique Arabic knowledge found its way to Central Europe. Even today “Arabic” numbers and countless words of Arabic origin bear witness to the influence of the Arabic world of that time on Central Europe. After nearly 1000 years, parts of the antique culture return via Toledo and Sicily to their birthplace. In the subsequent period, the Muslim cultural regions develop a dogmatic rigidity, whereas Europe becomes a beneficiary of the heathen Classical Antiquity in Arabic guise.

Europe blossoms in the “Renaissance”. A new spirit begins to be felt in civil society and at the universities. This succeeds in bringing art and science to life, even though it does not drive out the old ghosts: the Inquisition and the Reconquista remain. To overcome these, a new force is needed: the Enlightenment.

## *The Enlightenment*

The Enlightenment movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is the overture to the political revolution for freedom, participation, and human rights. Its motto: “Have the courage to reason for yourself”. It opens the flood gates and tears holes in the defences built up over many centuries. Constitutions adopt new values as their pillars of legitimisation. This is achieved against massive resistance from the Christian Churches, which even into the 20<sup>th</sup> century continue to reject the principles of democracy, separation of powers, and individual self-determination as violations of the divine order.

It is the values of the Enlightenment that today form the political and humanitarian backbone of our life in democratic freedom. Here, in the Enlightenment, the notion of the free individual, responsible for him- or herself is extolled, and the previous metaphysical and religious ties are released, together with the millennia-old shackles of salvation, damnation, and dominion.

Europe now begins to make use of reason and the senses, without support from the crutches of belief. Henceforth man and not God is the centre of attention and events. *This* is the spirit that allows Europe to shine.

But the heritage of the Enlightenment only truly begins to blossom from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards – following the downfall of nationalistic delusions and two devastating world wars, in which the Germans still fought under the banners “With God and the Emperor” and “With God and the Fuehrer”. After the Second World War, traditional religious values come under increasing pressure. The feminist movement opposes the idea of male supremacy that is found in the “holy scriptures”, and paragraphs concerning Christian morality are eliminated from criminal law (for example the “coupling clause”, which made it illegal to provide rooms for “indecent acts” between unmarried persons, or Section 175 of the German penal code against homosexual behaviour.)



## Conclusion

When searching for the roots of European culture, one encounters three main sources: Classical Antiquity, the intermediary Islamic-Arabic high culture and the Enlightenment. Founded upon the principles of science and reason, the equal rights of all people, and the freedom of the individual, today's culture has but few roots in religious Judaism and weak ones only in Christianity. However, it is connected by the strongest of ties to Classical Antiquity.

It is undisputed that Christianity has influenced European culture in certain special ways (think, for example, of the Gothic domes), and that for over a thousand years it determined the course of European history.

The effect, however, in terms of scientific-intellectual and political-cultural development, was largely to suppress rather than encourage progress. It is true that, starting in the 13th century, Christian theologians, for example the

Renaissance humanists, also played a part in the "rebirth of Europe"; but their main achievement was to free Europe of a burden that, without Christianity, would never have come about.

Thus, speaking of the "Christian Western world" is only really appropriate in the past tense, for example in connection with the monastic culture of the middle ages. The intellectual, scientific and social advancement of Europe since the Renaissance has not been built upon Christian values; on the contrary, it has been possible due to an increasing emancipation from these values.

The frequently feared "demise of the Christian Western world" actually took place long ago – and that is just as well! It is what opened the door to the development of our modern constitutional State, in which each individual is empowered to determine how he or she wants to live without being reprimanded by "religious authorities".

## FURTHER INFORMATION

on the topics of this brochure can be found in the trilogy of books by Rolf Bergmeier:

- Kaiser Konstantin und die wilden Jahre des Christentums (*Emperor Constantine and the Wild Years of Christianity*)
- Schatten über Europa: Der Untergang der antiken Kultur (*Shadows over Europe: The Downfall of Classical Antiquity*)
- Christlich-abendländische Kultur. Eine Legende (*Christian Western Culture. A Legend*)



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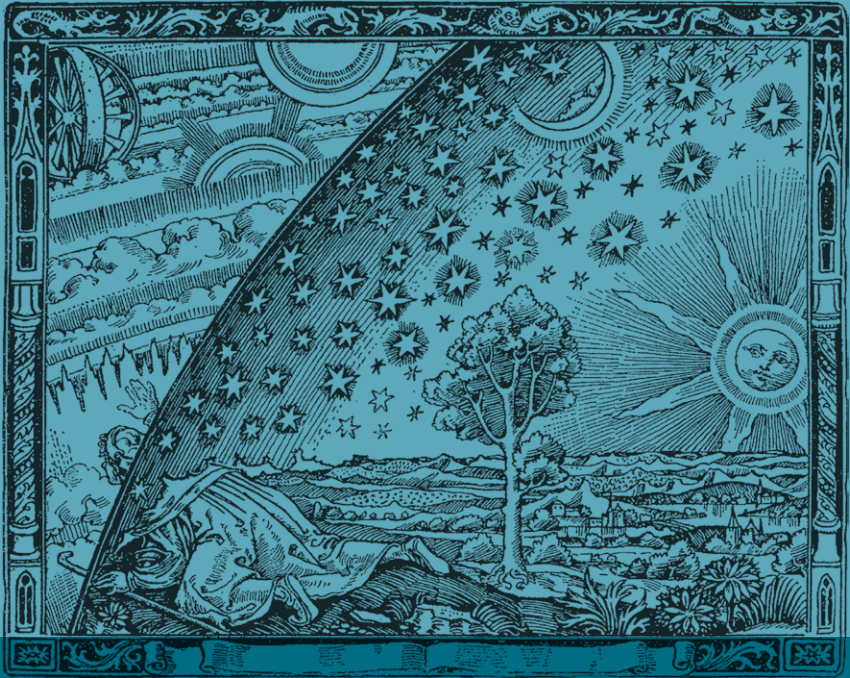
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