

The origins of Christian culture

1. What is culture?

You have been studying many cultures (or civilisations) which existed in the world before the beginning of the Church (Sumerian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Persian and Greek etc). What makes one culture different from another? The usual way to talk about culture is to say that the people of a particular culture have a common way of life. They have common beliefs and traditions which are expressed in their laws, their moral codes, their art and so on.

The word culture has its roots in the word '*cult*' which did not traditionally mean a small group of people with weird, fanatical ideas as it does today. Cult comes from the Latin word '*cultus*' which means, literally, 'to cultivate' (grow) but also 'to worship'. Our English word cult traditionally refers to a system of religious worship. This tells us that at the root of any culture is its religious beliefs, and these beliefs are expressed in a variety of ways which help us to tell one culture from another. So, for a culture to be Christian, the people's common way of life would need to be based on the Christian faith, and that faith would be expressed in laws, morals, art, architecture, literature and so on.

When we study a particular culture or civilisation, we usually try to work out where it came from - that is, we study its *origins*. If we want to study Greek culture, we will read about the Minoans and the Mycenaeans; if we want to study the Romans we will find out about Romulus and Remus. Often what we discover is that these cultures are connected in important ways, perhaps because they developed at the same time in different places, or because one people conquered another and adopted some of their beliefs and customs. To understand the origins or roots of Christian culture, we need to look at those cultures which were the most important at the beginning of the Church. That's what we'll look at in this first lesson.

N.B. While we are studying Christian culture we must not forget that the origins of *the Church* are supernatural: God intervened directly in human history at the Incarnation, and the Church was directly founded by Jesus Christ, God made Man. The Church itself, and its beliefs and teachings, did not grow or develop out of the cultures surrounding it. But as we will discover later, the ways in which early Christians expressed their faith were very much influenced by the cultures in which they lived.

Discussion points

- Do we live in a Christian society in Britain today? Why/why not?
- Does the Latin meaning of cult as 'to cultivate' still have any connection to our understanding of the word culture?

2. The Hebrew people

The history of the Hebrew people is extremely important for us as students of Christian culture. Why? Because it was to the Hebrew people alone that God revealed His nature and His plans, including His plan to send a Saviour, or Messiah: when this Saviour came, in the Person of Jesus Christ, He was born into the Hebrew people. It's also important to remember that the very first Christians, including all the apostles, were Hebrew (or Jewish, as the Hebrews had come to be known by that time). Like Our Lord Himself, they were all very familiar with the history of their people and with their sacred writings, especially with the promise of the Messiah. For these first Jewish-Christians, the coming of Christ was understood as the fulfilment of God's promises to His chosen people. This is why the New Testament is filled with references to the Old Testament - which can make it quite difficult sometimes for non-Hebrews like ourselves to understand.

When we study ancient history, Hebrew culture stands out from all the other cultures around it. It is very different because it did not develop in the usual way. God Himself directly intervened in human history to create the Hebrew people; He is their origin. God did this when, about 2,000 years before the birth of Christ, He chose to reveal Himself to a man called Abram. God changed the man's name to Abraham, sent him to a new land, and made a covenant (an agreement) with him that if Abraham would worship Him (the one true God) then God would be his protector and ensure that he would have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. The history of these descendants (sometimes faithful and sometimes not) is recorded in the Old Testament. Although the Hebrews did mix and mingle with other cultures and adopted their customs, they managed to develop a unique culture which was different from all the other cultures around them. One of the biggest differences was that every other culture in the world at that time was *polytheist* (a word meaning that the people worshipped more than one god): of all the peoples of the earth, only the Hebrews were *monotheist* (worshipping only one God).

Discussion points:

- In what ways did God prepare the Hebrew people for the coming of Jesus? - What is similar about the origins of the Hebrew people and the origins of the Church?

3. The Roman Empire

We know that Christ was born into the Hebrew people and belonged, in a human sense, to that particular culture. However, you might recall that at this time the land of Israel had been made part of the Roman Empire: the people were not completely free to live according to their own laws (this is why they needed Rome's permission to have Christ crucified). The Roman Empire dominated the known world at this time and so its culture plays a very important part in the story of the origins of Christian culture.

To make things just a bit more complicated, we need to remember that Roman culture was itself very much influenced by Greek culture. For many centuries, the Romans had been in contact with the Greeks and had adopted their ideas in architecture, art, literature,

philosophy and especially religion (remember, the Roman gods are essentially the Greek gods with different names). Later, in the last 200 years or so before the birth of Christ, when the Romans began conquering Europe, Asia and Africa, what was the main culture which they encountered? Greek culture. Alexander the Great had spread Greek (or 'Hellenistic') ideas and customs - and the Greek language - throughout his huge Empire, and these continued to be adopted and adapted by the Romans. For example, wealthy Romans expected their sons to be fluent in Greek as well as Roman, and to read the works of the great Greek philosophers; they often employed Greek tutors. Remember that at the very beginning of the Church her sacred writings were not written in Latin, the language of the Roman Empire: they were written in Hebrew and Greek.

4. Hellenistic Jews

There is one final piece in the puzzle of the origins of Christian culture and to understand it we have to go even further back than the Romans, all the way back to the time of the Assyrians and Babylonians. You might remember from your history lessons that in the eighth and sixth centuries before Christ, the land of the Hebrews was invaded and many of its people carried off into exile. Although they were later permitted to return, many had started new lives and chose to stay in other parts of the world. Later, when the Romans took over Israel, more Jews left Israel and settled in other parts of the Empire. At the time of Christ's birth, Jewish communities could be found in Europe, Africa and many parts of Asia. There was a very large Jewish community in the city of Rome itself.

Why is this important? Well, let's think about the kind of culture these Jews who lived outside Palestine encountered. Yes, it was Hellenistic. These Jews spoke Greek as well as Hebrew, and had adopted some aspects of Greek culture whilst remaining fully Jewish (do you remember that they had translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek in Alexandria? There are even records of Jewish priests in Alexandria taking part in Greek-style wrestling matches). When St. Peter stood up and preached on Pentecost Sunday, he was speaking to Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Asians, people from Egypt and Rome - all sorts. Many of these people were Hellenistic Jews; after being baptised, they would have carried the gospel back to their various countries. One of the most important Jewish centres was Antioch in Syria. While the Church officially started in Jerusalem, it was not long before Antioch became the main place for Christians living outside the Holy Land (the book of Acts tells us that it was in Antioch that followers of Christ were first called Christians). The first converts at Antioch were Hellenistic Jews, but it was not long at all before non-Jews (or 'gentiles') were being baptised too. This actually led to the first big argument in the Church. Some Jewish Christians believed that every Christian must be a Jew too. But Saint Paul disagreed strongly and managed to persuade the apostles that this idea was wrong. After the first ever official Church Council (in Jerusalem, in 50 AD), it was declared that people being baptised need not follow the Jewish laws and customs. Imagine how different Christian culture would have been if we had all had to be Jews too!

Discussion points: An historian once wrote, "There is no such thing as a culture that comes from nowhere. We are all heirs to the past." What do you think he means?

Quiz

1. From which Latin word do we derive our word 'culture'? Give two meanings of the Latin word.
2. To which group of people did the very first Christian converts belong?
3. Where do we find the history of this people recorded?
4. What one thing in particular made their culture so different from all others at the time?
5. Who spread Greek culture throughout the known world? What is the proper word for this culture?
6. In what languages are the scriptures written?
7. Why were many Jews living outside of Israel at the time of Christ?
8. In what famous city were the Hebrew scriptures translated into Greek?
9. In which city were followers of Jesus first called Christians? How do we know this?
10. What is the word used in the Bible to describe non-Jewish people?
11. What was the first big argument in the Church about?
12. Where and when was a council held to resolve the dispute?
13. What do the letters B.C. and A.D. mean after a date?