

Classical High School Students Say This Attribute Defines the West

Josh Herring teaches history at a secular, classical academy – but as with all teachers, sometimes he learns valuable lessons from his students. As high school students at the [Thales Academy](#) progress from studying ancient cultures to modernity, they invariably tell him they are struck by one principle that sets the Judeo-Christian West apart from previous civilizations. In a [new essay](#) for [Religion & Liberty Transatlantic](#), Herring [writes](#):

In ninth and tenth grades, students study the ancient and classical world. They track the development of different polytheistic practices (Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek), the practices of human sacrifice (Hittite, Phoenician), and the low view of humanity in the ancient Near East. In most mythologies, humanity is created either as a slave race to enable divine leisure, or as a by-product of a war between gods; in the Babylonian Enuma Elish mankind is a slave race enabling divine laziness.

Studying the Hebrews as the first monotheistic people establishes a contrast. The Hebrew self-conception begins with Adam and Eve made in the divine image, and even though they fall from a state of perfect grace, that divine dignity remains, eventually flowering into a law code Jesus of Nazareth summarized as requiring men to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength” and to “love your neighbour as yourself.” For the Hebrews, humans are not sacrificial victims, slaves, or accidental players in a cosmic tragedy. Instead, in this conception, man is, according to Richard Weaver, “the center of a divine drama.” The Hebrews left no towering monoliths or ziggurats, but

their development of a high view of human dignity made a lasting contribution to the Western tradition.

Without a single reference to theology, students who study classical history see an historic break between the West and every previous civilization. And, they say, respecting the human dignity of each person is the dividing line.

Moving from ancient Babylon to the modern era, Herring takes students – and his readers – through ancient Greece and Rome. Christian thinkers fused critical elements into a cohesive culture.

“Suddenly, the pieces fit together,” he [writes](#). “This image-bearing yet fallen creature capable of rational thought contains such worth in the eyes his Creator that Christ came to redeem mankind from the rule of sin and death.”

A chorus of contemporary secular authors – most recently [Douglas Murray](#), [James Kirchick](#), and [Rolf Peter Sieferle](#) – have asked whether [“European values”](#) and [“human rights”](#) can survive without the philosophical and religious presuppositions in which they developed. The remedy, in part, Herring [writes](#), is to resume accurately teaching the classical roots of Western culture:

The West has long celebrated freedom, but that freedom did not develop in a vacuum. The ability of human beings from around the world to act freely in economic, religious, social, and political spheres [grows out of key convictions](#) that contribute to the rich tapestry of the Western tradition. It is not enough to celebrate freedoms without understanding how they developed. If we cut off the roots that nourish our concept of freedom, the tree of liberty will collapse.

You can [read his full essay here](#).

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