

The main check on the individualistic side of our natures has historically come from religious morality. In the west, however, Christianity evolved as an individualistic religion, and pursuit of individual gratification was only held in check by a fierce guilt culture. With the 'death of God' in the late nineteenth century, this constraint was removed, and the effect can be seen today in the erosion of traditional family life.

Today, when romantic passion dissipates (as inevitably it does when the brain's receptors become desensitised to the release of phenylethylamine), nothing remains to bind us to our partners.

Individualism, economic development and the decline of the western family



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Individualism was an essential part of the west's economic development, but it is not essential, nor inevitable, that the rest of the world should embrace it if they are to emulate the west's economic success. This means that the social costs which have been paid in the west – in particular, the decline of the western family – need not be incurred elsewhere.

Cultural evolution and human nature

Unlike other animals, the human one is unique because its intelligence gives it the ability to change its environment by learning. It learns new ways of surviving in the new environment and then fixes them by social custom. These social customs form the culture of the relevant group, which are transmitted to new members of the group (mainly children) who do not then have to invent these 'new' ways *de novo* for themselves.

Evolutionary anthropologists and psychologists maintain that human nature was set during the period of human evolution ending with the Stone Age. Since then there has not been sufficient time for any further biological evolution to occur.

This human nature appears darker than Rousseau's and brighter than Hobbes' characterisations of it. Even in the hunter-gatherer Stone Age environment, the supremely egotistical human animal would have found some form of what evolutionary biologists term 'reciprocal altruism' useful. Cooperation with one's fellows in various hunter-gatherer tasks yields benefits for the selfish human which can be further increased if he or she can cheat and be a free rider. In the *repeated* interactions between the selfish humans comprising the tribe, such cheating could be mitigated by playing the game of 'tit for tat'. Evolutionary biologists claim that the resulting 'reciprocal altruism' would be part of our basic Stone Age human nature.

With the rise of settled agriculture and the civilizations that evolved around them, however, most of the Stone Age basic instincts which comprise our human nature would have been dysfunctional. With the multiplication of interactions between human beings in agrarian civilizations many of the transactions would have been with anonymous strangers whom one might never see again. The 'reciprocal altruism' of the Stone Age which depended upon a repetition of transactions would not be sufficient to curtail opportunistic behaviour.

Putting it differently, the 'tit for tat' strategy would not suffice. To prevent the resulting dissipation of the mutual gains from cooperation, agrarian civilizations would have needed to internalise restraints on 'anti-social' action through moral codes incorporated as part of their 'religions'. The universal moral emotions of shame and guilt were the means by which these 'moral codes', embodied in cultural traditions, were internalised in the socialisation process during infancy. Shame was the major instrument of this internalisation in the great agrarian civilizations. Their resulting cosmological beliefs can be described as being 'communalist'.

The great religions: communalism versus individualism

Both of the two remaining great agrarian civilizations, the Sinic and the Hindu, have an ethic which is distinctly 'communalist' rather than individualist, although there were important differences in the cosmological beliefs of these two ancient civilizations.

Hinduism did have a role for a form of individualism, which was reminiscent of that found among the Greek Stoics. The anthropologist Louis Dumont (1970) has labelled this as 'out-worldly' individualism as contrasted with the 'in-worldly' individualism which is the hallmark of 'modern' individualism. Hinduism allows the person who renounces the world and becomes an ascetic to pursue his/her

own personal salvation without any concern for the social world. For a Hindu who has not renounced the social world, however, western individualism is impossible. Ernest Gellner (1988) makes the point by asking us to imagine a Hindu Robinson Crusoe, a polyglot called Robinson Chatterjee. 'A Hindu Crusoe', he notes, 'would be a contradiction. He would be destined for perpetual pollution: if a priest, then his isolation and forced self-sufficiency would oblige him to perform demeaning and polluting acts. If not a priest, he would be doomed through his inability to perform the obligatory rituals'.

The Sinic civilization did not even have this out-worldly individualism of the Hindus and the Greeks. Its central cosmological beliefs have been summarised as its optimism, its familialism and its bureaucratic authoritarianism. As Henry Rosemont (1998) notes: within the Confucian framework 'I am not a free, autonomous individual. I am a son, husband, father, grandfather, neighbour, colleague, student, teacher, citizen, friend. I have a very large number of relational obligations and responsibilities, which severely constrain what I do. These responsibilities occasionally frustrate or annoy, they more often are satisfying and they are always binding . . . And my individuality, if anyone wishes to keep the concept, will come from the specific actions I take in meeting my relational responsibilities.'

Christianity has a number of distinctive features which it shares with its Semitic cousin Islam, but not entirely with its parent Judaism, and which are not to be found in any of the other great Eurasian religions. The most important is its universality. Neither the Jews, nor the Hindu or Sinic civilizations had religions claiming to be universal. You could not choose to be a Hindu, Chinese or Jew, you were born as one. This also meant that unlike Christianity and Islam these religions did not proselytise.

Furthermore, only the Semitic religions (being monotheistic) have also been egalitarian. Nearly all the other Eurasian religions believed in some form of hierarchical social order. By contrast, alone among the Eurasian civilizations, the Semitic ones (though least so the Jewish) emphasised the equality of men's souls in the eyes of their monotheistic Deities. Dumont (1970) has rightly characterised the resulting profound divide between the societies of *Homo Aequalis* which believe all men are born equal (as the *philosophes*, and the American constitution proclaim) and those of *Homo Hierarchicus* which believe no such thing.

Christianity remains at the nub of the west's beliefs, and at the heart of the clash of civilizations (east and west). There can be little doubt that neither the Hindu nor the Sinic civilizations have adhered to the western notions of liberty and equality based on individualism.

But, neither did the west, for a long time. For although Christianity came inadvertently to promote the in-worldly individualism which is a hallmark of western civilization, in its basic teachings it did not differ from the communalism found in the other great ethical beliefs systems of the Ancient world. Like the Greeks and the Hindus it did provide a place for out-worldly individualism, but how did the in-worldly individual arise in the west?

The rise of the west

I have argued elsewhere that the rise of the west was mediated by the Catholic Church in the 6th–11th centuries, through its promotion of individualism, first in family affairs and later in material relationships. The Catholic Church introduced all the legal and institutional requirements of a market economy as a result of two Papal revolutions.

The twin Papal revolutions arose because of the unintended consequences of the Church's search for bequests – a trait that goes back to its earliest days. From its inception it had grown as a temporal power through gifts and donations – particularly from rich widows (so much so that, in July 370 the Emperor Valentinian had addressed a ruling to the Pope that male clerics and unmarried ascetics should not hang around the houses of women and widows and try to worm themselves and their churches into their bequests at the expense of the women's families and blood relations). The Church was thus from its beginnings in the race for inheritances. The early Church's extolling of virginity and preventing second marriages helped it in creating more single women who would leave bequests to the Church.

This Papal family revolution made the Church unbelievably rich. Demographers have estimated that the net effect of the prohibitions on traditional methods to deal with childlessness was to leave 40 per cent of families with no immediate male heirs. The Church became the chief beneficiary of the resulting bequests. Its accumulation was phenomenal. Thus, for instance, in France one third of productive land was in ecclesiastical hands by the end of the 7th century!

But this accumulation also drew predators from within and without to deprive the Church of its acquired property. It was to deal with this denudation that Pope Gregory VII instigated his Papal revolution in 1075, by putting the power of God – through the spiritual weapon of excommunication – above that of Caesar. With the Church then coming into the world, the new Church-state also created all the administrative and legal infrastructure which we associate with a modern polity, and which provided the essential institutional infrastructure for the western dynamic that in time led to Promethean growth. Thus Pope Gregory VII's Papal revolution lifted the lid on the basic human instinct to 'truck and barter', and in time to a change in the traditional Eurasian pattern of material beliefs with their suspicion of markets and merchants. This in time led to modern economic growth.

But the first Papal revolution of Gregory the Great also led to a change in the traditional Eurasian family patterns which were based on various forms of 'joint families' and family values. This essentially removed the lid on the opportunistic basic instincts which the shame-based moral codes of Eurasia had controlled. To counter the potential threat this posed, the Church created a fierce guilt culture in which Original Sin was paramount, and morality was underwritten by the belief in the Christian God.

The death of God

This system of control based on guilt and the fear of God fell apart in the 19th century. First Darwin showed that God was blind, and then Nietzsche proclaimed from the rooftops at the end of the 19th century that God was Dead. The moral foundations of the west were thereafter in ruins.

Subsequent attempts to found a morality based on reason all failed because they all foundered on Nietzsche's fatal objection in his aphorism about utilitarianism: 'Moral sensibilities are nowadays at such cross purposes that to one man a morality is proved by its utility, while to another its utility refutes it' (Nietzsche 1881-1982: 220). Nietzsche's greatness lies in clearly seeing the moral abyss that the death of its God had created for the west. Kant's attempt to ground a rational morality on his principle of universalisability – harking back to the Biblical injunction 'therefore all things whatsoever ye do would that men

should do to you, do even so to them' – founders on Hegel's two objections: it is merely a principle of logical consistency without any specific moral content, and worse, it is as a result powerless to prevent any immoral conduct that takes our fancy. The subsequent ink spilt by moral philosophers has merely clothed their particular prejudices in rational form.

Family strength and the problem of romantic love

The western Christian world, particularly in its north western outpost, deviated from what had been the traditional family pattern in Eurasia from about the late 6th century. The major difference was that in the west the Church came to support the independence of the young: in choosing marriage partners, in setting up their households and entering into contractual rather than affective relationships with the old. They promoted love marriages rather than the arranged marriages common in Eurasia. Friar Lawrence in *Romeo and Juliet* egging on the young lovers against their families' wishes is emblematic of this trend. But why did the Church promote love marriages?

It has been thought that romantic love, far from being a universal emotion, was a western social construct of the age of chivalry in the Middle Ages. However, recent anthropological and psychological research confirms that this is erroneous – romantic love is a universal emotion. Moreover it has a biological basis. Neuro-psychologists have shown that it is associated with increased levels of phenylethylamine, an amphetamine-related compound. Interestingly, the same distinct biochemicals are also to be found in other animal species such as birds which also evince this emotion. However, it appears that this emotion is ephemeral. After a period of attachment the brain's receptor sites for the essential neuro-chemicals become desensitised or overloaded and the infatuation ends, setting up both the body and brain for separation/divorce. This period of infatuation has been shown to last for about three years. A cross-cultural study of divorce patterns in 62 societies between 1947 and 1989 found that divorces tend to occur around the fourth year of marriage!

A universal emotion with a biological basis calls for an explanation. Socio-biologists maintain that in the primordial environment it was vital for males and females to be attracted to each other to have sex and reproduce and also for the males to be attached enough to the females to look after their young until they were old enough to move into a peer group and be looked after by the hunting-gathering band. The traditional period between successive human births is four years – which is also the modal period for those marriages which end in divorce today. Darwin strikes again! The biochemistry of love, it seems, evolved as an 'inclusive fitness' strategy of our species.

The capacity to love may be universal but its public expression is culturally controlled. For as everyone's personal experience will confirm, it is an explosive emotion. Given its relatively rapid decay, with settled agriculture the evolved instinct for mates to stay together for about four years and then move on to new partners to conceive and rear new young would have been dysfunctional. Settled agriculture requires settled households. If households are in permanent flux there could not be settled households on particular parcels of lands.

Not surprisingly, most agrarian civilizations sought to curb the explosive primordial emotion which would have destroyed their way of making a living. They have used cultural constraints to curb this dangerous hominid tendency by relying on arranged marriages, infant betrothal

and the like, restricting romantic passion to relationships outside marriage. The west stands alone in using this dangerous biological universal as the bastion of its marriages, as reflected in the popular song: 'Love and marriage, Love and marriage, Go together like a horse and carriage.'

The reason for this western exceptionalism goes back to the earliest period of the Christian Church, as we have seen. But the Church also had to find a way to prevent the social chaos which would have ensued if the romantic passion its greed had unleashed as the basis for marriage had been allowed to run its course in what remained a settled agrarian civilization. First it separated love and sex, and then created a fierce guilt culture based on Original Sin. Its pervasive teaching against sex and the associated guilt it engendered provided the necessary antidote to the 'animal passions' that would otherwise have been unleashed by the Church's self-interested overthrowing of the traditional Eurasian system of marriage.

But once the Christian God died with the Scientific and Darwinian revolutions, these restraints built on Original Sin were loosened and, with the 1960s sexual revolution, finally removed. The family as most civilizations have known it became sick in the west, as the western humanoids reverted to the 'family' practices of their hunter-gatherer ancestors.

Does the rest of the world have to follow suit?

There is no reason whatsoever for the rest of the world to follow this peculiar and particular western trajectory. It is not modernisation but the unintended consequences of Pope Gregory I's family revolution which have led to the death in the west of the Eurasian family values the Rest rightly continues to cherish. The Rest do not have to embrace this cosmology.

While there is general worldwide acceptance of the material beliefs underlying the institutional changes underpinning the market resulting from Gregory VII's 11th century Papal revolution, which promote the modernisation sought worldwide, there is no need for the non-western world to accept the cosmological beliefs promoted by Gregory the Great's Papal revolution of the 6th century.

It is possible to modernise without westernising. Rather than heed the continuing western moral crusade in pursuit of its 'habits of the heart' – which, far from being universal, remain the culture-specific, proselytising and egalitarian ethic of what is still, at heart, western Christendom – the non-western world, observing the social decay in the west its cosmology has caused, can rightly invoke the ancient Biblical injunction: 'Physician heal thyself'.

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This article is an abridged version of Dr Lal's paper entitled 'Is liberty a western concept?', delivered at the Mont Pelerin Society special regional meeting in Bali, Indonesia, 8–11 July 1999. A fuller discussion and references can be found in the author's (1998) *Unintended Consequences*.