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Why Christian culture is essential to education

It deeply informed our art and our ideas

The Critic Essay

By

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The news that [the University of Nottingham](#) issued a trigger warning to [students](#) concerning [Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*](#) (1387-1400) ([as well as to the work of other medieval authors](#) such as [William Langland](#), author of [Piers Plowman](#) (c. 1370-1386), [John Gower](#) and [Thomas Hoccleve](#)) on the grounds that these contain “expressions of Christian faith”, along with depictions of violence and mental illness, has generated much comment. This has generally focused on the question of why such expression should be viewed as somehow “triggering” and whether this amounts to yet more de facto marginalisation of anything associated with Western culture, at least its historical manifestations.

This decision is indicative of wider problems engendered by a rigid adherence to ideas of inclusivity which render marginal much significant learning. Nottingham is a university at which [76 per cent of students are from the UK](#), and a significant number of the remaining 24 per cent will be from other parts of the EU. There are likely to be a large number of students (including some from non-Caucasian groups) from backgrounds which were historically Christian, even if some would not profess to any religion today ([a 2021 census](#) found 46.2 per cent of those surveyed in England and Wales described themselves as Christian, compared to 59.3 per cent in 2011, and 37.2 per cent as having “no religion”, compared to 25.2 per cent in 2011). But a minority of students will have been raised in other religious traditions (Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, etc.), while there will be a significant number with “no religion”, or amongst some “Christian” students those for whom this may be only relatively nominal, amounting to [hatch, match and dispatch](#) rather than any more sustained engagement with the faith.

My own background amounted to the latter, combined with some compulsory services (which I hated with a passion) and hymn-singing (which was different) at school. Today I do not identify with any religion, and strongly support the separation of church and state. I dislike religious involvement with politics in general, even when the views of religious figures are those with which I essentially agree, and I would like to see all religious observance taken out of state education. As a pianist, I have performed large amounts of music by devoted Christian composers from J.S. Bach through Franz Liszt to Olivier Messiaen, but do not share any of their faiths.

Yet I still think teaching about Christian traditions is essential in education, and have read most of both the Old and New Testaments (as well as other holy books). Why? Let me look first at the counter-argument, which appears to underlie the thinking of the University of Nottingham. Christianity is just one faith amongst many, while many have no faith at all. To assign it any special place in education, or even to treat

it in a benign fashion, not warranting any particular qualification of the type issued by the university, could seem the most “inclusive” approach to education, also expecting and requiring nothing in terms of prior knowledge and/or cultural background.

If one were to disqualify any specific education in Western history, culture, thought and more, insisting that everything must be taught globally, and that which is Western assigned no particular priority, then this position would be at least relatively coherent. It would nonetheless confuse the meaning of “tertiary” education, if there is no perceptible body of earlier common knowledge and skills upon which university teachers can build. But beyond this consideration, I do not believe such disqualification to be a viable or at all satisfactory position, despite wishing to encourage wider global awareness, including historical global awareness.

First of all, in the limited time available for teaching at any level, teaching everything, everywhere, at any time, is obviously impossible. The alternatives, [about which I have written critically elsewhere](#), are either to teach a series of touristic vignettes from highly divergent times and places, or simply to give up on teaching any sort of historical content, in literature or elsewhere, in favour of a narrow “presentist” set of concerns. This is the approach favoured by the [#DisruptTexts movement](#) (with which a bizarre and perhaps cynically virtue-signalling partnership [was announced in 2021 by Penguin Books](#)), adherents to which favour removing almost all historical literature from curricula to be replaced at least in part by “Young Adult” literature. (One teacher even took pride in having [Homer’s *Odyssey*](#) removed.) Such a destructive attitude and approach to an incredibly rich and varied Western literary tradition is myopic at best, at worst approaching the phenomenon of [cultural genocide](#). Certainly it would cause massive, lasting damage to the study of literature at any level.

A spokesperson for the University of Nottingham claimed that “the late-medieval worldview” encountered in the work of Chaucer and others would be “alienating and strange” for many students. This might well be true, including for some contemporary practicing Christians. Chaucer (c. 1343-1400) grew up during the period of the Black Death, and his lifetime overlapped with the Western Schism, with dual papacies and rival bases of power in Rome and Avignon. As one who travelled around French, Flemish, Spanish and Italian regions, Chaucer was acutely aware of these developments, and [one of his Italian trips may have been to indicate English support for Italian pope Urban VI](#). The Crusades had come to an end in the thirteenth century but all the antagonisms they entailed continued to inform Christian thinking and history, not least the ongoing strife in [Al-Andalus](#), the Iberian region then under Muslim rule as part of the Umayyad Empire, culminating in the *Reconquista* of 1492, coinciding with the beginnings of the Spanish Inquisition, the expulsions of the Jewish population in Spain, and the landing by Cristoforo Colombo in the Americas — all events of vast historical significance.

Another piece of “alienating and strange” late medieval literature would be [Dante Alighieri’s *Divina Commedia*](#) (c. 1308-1321), especially the third section, *Paradiso*, arguably the most arcane and forbidding for modern readers. This section abounds with references to what may now seem esoteric medieval theological ideas (especially from Saint Thomas Aquinas and Boethius) on freedom of will, exile, excommunication, divine justice, the body, still fundamentally linked to the soul, the

geography of the world, astronomy, etc. despite also employing language and ideas from classical mythology and history, as well the history of more recent times, not to mention ecclesiastical and other politics. I find it hard to imagine being able to read this masterwork without some knowledge of these things. In *Purgatorio*, Canto XXX, the disappearance of the pagan Virgil and the arrival of Beatrice, who proceeds to admonish the narrator for having strayed, could not be more replete with Christian symbolism. All of this may well be remote, alienating and strange for many contemporary readers. But is it not a vital aspect of education to take students beyond their comfort zones, to introduce them to ideas, feelings, ideologies, images, sounds, experiences which lie outside the boundaries of that which they have already encountered? Without this, does educational “diversity” have any meaning at all?

The Renaissance saw an abundance of both secular and sacred literature, painting and music. It makes little sense to treat these as mutually exclusive categories, since techniques, aesthetics, styles, ideologies and much else from either tradition regularly informed the other. To disregard Christian archetypes, biblical allusions, or references to then-contemporary religious disputes, events and theological debates in secular work of [Rabelais](#), [Ariosto](#), [Cervantes](#) or [Shakespeare](#) is absurd, as it would be to ignore [Guillaume Dufay](#)’s use of secular song within sacred works, or common aspects of the expressive language of Luca Marenzio’s [sacred](#) and [secular](#) music, or Rembrandt van Rijn’s modelling of [biblical upon human figures](#), or [allusion to biblical events in constructing secular images](#). Few examples of persecuted individuals in literature, theatre, opera can be wholly divorced from Christian ideas of martyrdom.

It would not be difficult to trace many similar phenomenon and extensive cross-fertilisation between sacred and secular cultural traditions in subsequent centuries, and for that matter interactions with traditions rooted in Christianity amongst Jewish and other artists and thinkers in the West during these periods (and conversely Christian figures influenced by aspects of post-Christ Judaism and Jewish history and culture).

Even work which has been characterised as anti-clerical, irreverent or blasphemous is often highly indebted to Christian traditions. [Voltaire was educated by Jesuits](#) and some of his work can be viewed as much as [a defence of aspects of Northern European non-Catholic intellectual traditions](#) as simple rejection of all religion. Percy Bysshe Shelley [avowedly rejected the existence of God](#), but is his Prometheus wholly separable from the archetype of Christ? Decadent artists also drew heavily on ritualistic and mystical aspects of Christian traditions. Joris-Karl Huysmans’s novel [Là-bas](#) (1891) includes an elaborate description of a [black mass](#), a highly sacrilegious ritual celebrated by Satanist groups, but directly modelled on a Roman Catholic Mass. Similarly, [Aleksander Skryabin’s Ninth Sonata, op. 68 \(1912-13\)](#) is commonly known as the “Black Mas” Sonata, a name given to it by others, and approved of by Skryabin. Writers and artists including Huysmans, and [Aubrey Beardsley](#), both converted to Catholicism late in life.

Contemporary examples such as Luis Buñuel’s film [Viridiana \(1961\)](#), or for that matter [The Life of Brian \(1979\)](#), could never have been written without extensive knowledge of the traditions which they have come to offend, as much so as [Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses \(1988\)](#) with respect to Islamic history.

Christian traditions have also been linked to wider economic and political developments. The sociologist [Max Weber](#), in his *[The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism](#)* (1904-05), traced in much detail how what Weber identified as the motivations behind economic processes vital to modern capitalism were deeply rooted in Calvinist (as distinct from Lutheran) thought, with a combination of a will towards accumulation removed from any tendencies to spend the fruits of this in a lavish manner, together with a cultivation of work as part of man's calling, and of course the devising of means to do all of this in as rational, efficient and productive a manner as possible. This massively influential sociological text, linking economics to religion, has inspired much subsequent sociological work such as that of [Peter Berger](#) or [Bryan Wilson](#). Weber himself went on to undertake related studies of [Confucianism](#), [Taoism](#), [Hinduism](#), [Buddhism](#) and [Ancient Judaism](#), whilst his more scattered thoughts on Islam have been developed and expanded by later scholars such as [Bryan Turner](#).

To return to my question as to why an atheist and secularist like myself still believes in the importance of teaching and learning about Christianity: in one sense I respond to Liszt's *[Harmonies poétiques et religieuses](#)* (1847) or Messiaen's *[Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus](#)* (1944), both of which I have played often, fundamentally in terms of human, or at least potential human emotions, experiences, desires, sensations, inspirations. There is no such thing as a genuinely divine dimension from my own perspective. Religious concepts are products of the human imagination, projections outwards which satisfy human needs. But religion has served immensely to stimulate that imagination, and Christianity has played an absolutely central role in the lives of individuals, communities and societies for two millennia. The same (albeit with different timeframes) can be said of other religions.

And if one believes that art is something to more than passively contemplate, or use as a stimulant for an otherwise somewhat quietist mode of being, then it is something to understand in context, including the intellectual and theological context from which it emerges, as part of a process of learning more about human beings and their collective life. [Alfred Dürr](#) and [Eric Chafe](#) have both written outstanding books on *[J.S. Bach's immense body of cantatas](#)*. Both analyse this body of work within the context of the Lutheran theological tradition in which the cantatas were composed (as well as approaching the music in terms of other stylistic, analytical, formal and other considerations). Chafe in particular demonstrates the extent to which so many aspects of the specifically *musical* content are replete with wider religious symbolism, while the very development of Bach's musical language (and that of others around him) were themselves informed by the dictates of Lutheran thought. Reading about this has added immensely to my understanding and appreciation of this body of work, and I could not imagine separating it from this, even though in no sense am I a Lutheran, nor accept much of what Luther, or Bach, believed.

Similarly, I in no way believe in the concept of hell, but equally think the world would be a poorer place without its cultural depictions in the work of Dante, [Hieronymous Bosch](#), [John Milton](#) or [William Blake](#) — or William Langland — and cannot imagine an embodiment of concentrated evil as in [Graham Greene's *Pinkie Brown in Brighton Rock*](#) (1938), nor the intense explorations of depravity

linked to religion and sexuality in the writings of [Georges Bataille](#), without that genuine belief in (and fascination with) evil that is such a part of Catholic tradition.

If regions in Africa, Asia, South America placed their own literary and cultural traditions at the centre of education, it is hard to imagine much disapproval, other than from those seeking wholesale cultural revolution and upheaval, as found in various movements, and with varying degrees of success, in Russia, Germany, Turkey, Japan, China and Cambodia, during the twentieth century. In almost all these cases the older traditions were not obliterated and eventually returned. Even the most destructive and mass-murderous actions of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (killing around 90 percent of Cambodian artists) [did not ultimately succeed in destroying a culture](#). [Confucius was held up for special censure during the Chinese Cultural Revolution](#), and his grave desecrated in a ceremonious fashion, but Confucianism has returned into Chinese cultural life, [with President Xi even delivering a keynote address at a symposium for the anniversary of his birth](#). One would hope that much of Nazi culture will never return in Germany, but much historical German culture which was lionised by the Nazis, whether that of Albrecht Dürer, Matthias Grünewald, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe or Richard Wagner, has not disappeared from consciousness, nor should it, though interpretations tend to have shifted considerably away from those favoured by Nazi cultural ideologues.

But wantonly baneful and blanket attitudes towards vast swathes of Western culture are [very far from uncommon](#) amongst post-colonial ideologues and [adherents of Critical Race Theory](#). Many Western liberals, consumed by post-colonial guilt, can be loath to argue or dispute this view. Where this could lead other than to societies paralysed by self-hatred and denial is difficult to see. To characterise any sort of special interest in one's own culture and history (unless one belongs to a minority group, including regional minorities such as the Scots or Basque) as illegitimate, or even as revealing far right or white supremacist traditions, is, when not reducible to plain ignorance or anti-intellectualism, a form of rejection of the majority of *people* which is often indicative as much of snobbery and genuine elitism as any worthwhile multicultural aspirations.

The idea of there being a “common culture” is itself less “commonly” believed than when I was younger. Western history is not the history of all living in Western societies, especially not those from minority groups who migrated to the West within the last 100 years. The histories of the Ottoman, Benin or Mughal Empires, the Ming, Jin and Qing dynasties, or the establishment of Bantu-speaking states in Central and Southern Africa, would naturally have meanings for members of various minority groups in the West, in terms of events which affected their ancestors, to a much greater degree than might the split between Rome and Constantinople, the Tudor dynasty, Peter the Great's westernising reforms in Russia, or the process leading to the Italian *risorgimento*.

There is also nothing to be achieved and much to be lost by neglecting the transatlantic slave trade as a vital aspect of Western history, just as histories of imperial conquest, dispossession, slavery and subjugation are intrinsic parts of a range of global histories. Vladimir Putin may have [passed a law banning comparisons between Stalin's Soviet Union and Nazi Germany](#), while China [bans mention of the](#)

[Tiananmen Square massacre](#), but these states will not and must not stop such fundamental events being explored by historians and others elsewhere.

So Western history and culture may not be that of everyone who lives in Western countries, nor that with which they identify, but they do fundamentally inform the contemporary societies which such people now inhabit and with which they interact. Western history and culture does deserve a prominent — though by no means exclusive — place in education for that reason alone. Christianity has been a central factor in these histories, not exclusively (traditions and mythologies from the classical and pagan worlds have also played important roles), but very prominently. For this reason, knowledge of the bible, its interpretations, and the history of the religion in the West remain important for all to learn.