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Uncovering the Evolution of Values through Early World Literature

From an ancestry of roaming bands to the organized global community of today; as humanity has grown and evolved, cultures have been as varied and diverse as the terrain on which they stand. What could be accepted as beautiful and desirable on a remote island in Southeast Asia may intuitively repel a native of Scandinavia; different cultures have different values. Despite this, as a common species there are some cultural aspects that modern scholars think of as universals; meaning all human cultures will share this common tendency. Studying early literature provides a powerful insight into the minds of early human civilizations; allowing modern academics a window into the cultural commonalities and differences of ancient humans. These cultural universals run a common vein through seemingly different and distant societies, they are the values and impulses we call our humanity. As the rise of organized religions and the decline of warrior code changed the value systems of many regions within a relatively small span of a few hundred years, familiar contemporary concepts such as family honor, dutiful living, devotion, and obedience, gained prominence and empathy became a desirable trait. Great works like Valmiki's *The Ramayana* and Confucius' *Analects* may seem worlds away from the Qu'ran, Paul's "Letter to the Romans", or Augustine's *Confessions*, yet these texts when read objectively and removed from an ingrained cultural value, may suggest a global progression towards modern cultural values that readers today find familiar.

Some of the earliest literature modern scholars have access to are often categorized as epic, that is to say it features a singular extraordinary hero whose ability to wage and win wars is

his most highly valued attribute. This warrior mentality was pervasive in the ancient world, men fought and took their spoils; epic tales do not go out of the way to sympathize with the losers. However, as values changed over time so did the nature of the epic hero as is evidenced by the hero of *The Ramayana* a young prince in exile named Rama. Early in the epic Sita, Rama's young wife, describes her husband: "He is virtuous, honest, truthful, and devoted to the welfare of all people." (Valmiki 886) Though this may make Rama a desirable partner today, it is not what early readers of *The Ramayana* would have expected of an epic hero. This character is a marked departure from the selfish motivations and glory seeking in so many other ancient epics. Rama is an epic hero who continues to resonate with readers today as much as *The Ramayana* continues to model current social expectations and values. During a recent television adaptation of the epic it is reported that, "Churches rescheduled services and trains waited at stations while commuters and officials alike stopped to watch *Ramayan*, regarding the viewing as an act of worship," according to Mangharam (2). Clearly the tale had an epic impact on the culture.

The Ramayana was exceptional in the way it emphasized obedience to authority and social constructs, through Rama's example. Though Rama was slated to be the next ruler of his region, he never doubts his father's decision to send him into exile and consecrate his brother instead. To his stepmother he declares, "As for me, I shall leave here in all haste for Dandaka wilderness, without questioning my father's word." (Valmiki 877). He is a prince and the hero of this epic tale and yet he never wavers in his submission just as Sita, Rama's wife, also serves as a model citizen with her utter devotion to Rama. Sita arose from the early epic not just as an ideal woman but also setting a model example for humanity male and female alike. As Mukti Lahki Mangharam stated in her article that addressed the continued popularity of the tale: "Sita is a figure of strength and forbearance; she undergoes Rama's abuses and then ultimately refuses to

be tested by him, asking Mother Earth to swallow her and attest to her purity of conscience, all without even once forsaking her devotion to him” (80) Women in literature prior to *The Ramayana* rarely displayed a strong will of their own if they voiced an opinion at all. Rama’s empathetic and understanding nature complements Sita’s unwavering loyalty, together providing a cultural foundation for Indian society that evolved strong ideals of devotion and obedience with honor and duty overtaking the physical prowess of a man.

The Analects are attributed to Confucius, a man who lived over twenty-five hundred years ago; yet the values that make up the core of the work maintain prevalence in today’s culture. For example, a keyword and major concept of Confucian teachings carries a modern translation many English speakers know, “the gentleman”. Throughout *The Analects* Confucius elevates his concept of gentlemanly behavior as the ideal all men should strive for asking repeatedly, “is this not the mark of a gentleman?” (*Analects* 1047 1.1). Confucius stresses the concept of filial piety stating; “the only time a dutiful son ever makes his parents worry is when he is sick” (*Analects* 1048 2.6). The gentlemanly behavior of a dutiful child requires a human to be empathetic, to be concerned by another’s feelings. By introducing these behaviors, he creates what was at the time a new outline for the concept of “good”. That is, a person’s greatness is not defined by his glory in battle or material riches but by his actions; which he then proceeds to detail for his followers. As Liang-Hung Lin and his colleagues state in their article on the subject Confucius “constructed philosophy of moral order, duty, ceremony, as well as respect of family and authority.” (91) As Confucian teachings were presented to the populace during a critical time that Lin refers to as the “Warring States Period (dating) 475-221 B.C.E.” (91) the introduced inherent structure and morality were a striking contrast to a violent and unstable period in Chinese history. They go on to suggest that by creating an empathetic and socially responsible

framework for his countrymen to operate within “Confucius and his students, acted as the agent of control responsible for the unity of the society and country.” (92) Ultimately, Confucian texts provide critical information about the movement of a young civilization from anarchy and war to a more domestic and nationalist mentality that permeates the Chinese society even today.

As early Judeo-Christian practices began to take their foothold in the Middle East, the Christian Bible’s New Testament and Augustine’s *Confessions* provided the written documentation of a civilization’s progress toward empathy. The Judeo-Christian concept of a good man is sprinkled prominently throughout the writings of Paul, particularly in his Epistle to the Romans. Like Confucius and Valmiki before him, Paul explains that a good person is not the one with the most battles under his belt but someone who cares for other people. Paul says it definitively and succinctly, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Paul 1269 Chapter 13). Similarly, in his *Confessions*, Augustine weaves a narrative that undermines a self-motivated culture as he condemns much of his own earlier life and beliefs. In Michael McCarthy’s article on the subject he posits that “For Augustine, the drive for glory and self-satisfaction underlying a culture of pride proves self-defeating to a heart” (467). McCarthy goes on to explain his opinion that Augustine was guiding humanity away from a culture that sought praise; to a culture that’s sole purpose is to praise only God (467).

Self-discipline and obedience surface again in the early Christian writings of Paul, though it takes a slightly different form due to the different purposes of the texts. In early Christian writing the concept of obedience to a parent is still prominent, yet another parental figure becomes important: the Christian god. Obedience to God and following the path and teachings of Jesus are the most important concepts to early Christianity, and Jesus’ teachings in their essence embraced empathy. Augustine too stresses this in his *Confessions* as he laments his

shortcomings and failures to live a good life in his youth. Augustine's early life would not have caused a stir in the time of Virgil, the poet he claimed to revere most in his youth; yet he is deeply repentant of his former ways writing, "I accept rebuke for my evil ways and wish to love your good ways" (Augustine 1304-05). However, the great evil he is describing here is simply a youthful ignorance of or disobedience to Christian teachings and yet to early Christians this was stressed as a great failure. The gods of old that were accepting and sometimes encouraging of physical pursuits had changed. The god belonging to Augustine and Paul is one that will accept nothing less than a perfect morality. As Alan Strathern puts it in his article on the subject, "The warrior god was no longer merely fighting on behalf of his people but challenging them to fight their own evil within" (295). This changed the course of many nations as Christianity spread like wildfire across the Middle East and beyond, so went the early Christian importance of compassion and empathy.

When Muhammad was teaching the morality of the *Qu'ran* he intended not to invalidate the previous writings of the Bible but to expand on them, adding another chapter to his god's story. As a result of this the *Qu'ran* touts many similar concepts of goodness and propriety, though perhaps more thoroughly developed and specific. On the topic of women in particular the *Qu'ran* gives more attention, if not credit to, women than Confucius or the Bible. Women in the *Qu'ran* are allowed inheritances and seem to have some level of autonomy; though plenty of loopholes are written in to give the men some wiggle room, while still adhering to the laws of God. The *Qu'ran* does firmly express the concept of honoring one's parents when it simply reads, "honour the mothers who bore you" (347). This sentiment seems to have achieved global popularity by this point, attaining status as a cultural universal. Notably, the text explicitly says to honor one's mother, not just the father or parents in general. Muhammed may

refer to women as “feeble-minded” (Qu’ ran 348) but he does stress kindness to them; and though the concept of what he deems fair to women is far from egalitarian, it does still emphasize kind and fair treatment of others, an empathetic world view to complement the religious texts from which it was based.

Much of the text of the Qu’ ran demonstrates the new concepts of a good life: kindness and equality, giving a fair share to the less fortunate, and, above all else, submission to God. While religion is generally believed to be a cultural universal, in the time period many of these works were penned the concept of monotheism was still in its youth. When comparing works such as the Bible and the Qu’ ran with teachings of Confucius and *The Ramayana* it becomes apparent that mankind was collectively refining and constructing an intricate and sublime layer to its consciousness. The common thread of peaceful teachings woven into the framework of these religions is a basic concept in most, as Abdel Haleem states in his article “Understanding the Qu’ ran,” “Muslims learn from the Qu’ ran that God’s objective in creating the human race in different communities was that they should relate to each other peacefully.” It would seem that many were teaching peace via religion at this time, empathy in theory ruled the day. These rising religions built themselves on a new foundation of empathy and caring, teaching morality and kindness to replace the warrior code that had oppressed so many for so long.

Though on the surface ancient Indian, Chinese, Judeo-Christian and Islamic cultures are radically different, studies of early yet culturally significant texts reveal a deeper connection. At the time this literature was written, communities across the globe were making a relatively synchronized progress towards a universal collection of cultural values and norms that shunned the previous destructiveness of warrior code. Physical strength and wealth were no longer presented as the single highest achievement and the ideas of obedience, duty, honor, and

devotion to something greater than one's self were all radical alternatives. Space was created for alternative walks of life and success, including acquired religious status. Still today some of these newer cultural norms persist as ideals by modern standards, leaving readers to question whether these ancient texts were part of an inevitable linear progression. Was this period a teenage societal growth spurt of empathy toward a more enlightened egalitarian end, or is global culture perhaps more cyclical, moving uniformly back towards rule by physical strength and wealth?

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