THE MEANING OF CLASSICISM
MARILYNN HITCHENS

The basis for classicism is the evolution of societies into civilizations. Civilizations developed as agriculture displaced hunting and gathering as the major economic foundation of society. As a result, political, economic, social, and cultural institutions became more complex, differentiated, and defining. Between 500 B.C. and A.D. 800, in many parts of the world, civilizations evolved to the point that they began to organize highly developed political, social, and cultural institutions and characteristics. Thus, for example, China began to develop patterns of thought and culture decidedly different from western Europe or India. In each case, these patterns were greatly influenced by religious thought and traditions. Religious or philosophical thought legitimized governments, shaped class structure, and guided the arts. These patterns became so influential that they spread to other societies and have remained important to this day in understanding cultural differences. The classical period ended between the third and ninth centuries A.D. due to internal decay, external attack, or transcultural exchange and fusion. While in a broad sense the process of classical development is still ongoing in history, as for example in the evolution of American civilization into a type of classic experience, the word classic is most often used in world history when referring to certain civilizations that thrived from 500 B.C. to A.D. 800, when specific religious and philosophical thought created powerful and long-lasting civilizational experiences.

Classicism, therefore, can be understood as defining and long-lasting civilizational patterns shaped by belief systems. Belief systems include both philosophies and religions. Philosophies reach truth by logic while religions seek truth in faith. Philosophies often dwell in secular concerns while religions tend to focus on the afterlife and the life of the spirit. Religions have deities, priests, churches, and rituals, while philosophies are characterized by having teachers, schools of thought, academies, and exercises. Both religions and philosophies search for the meaning of life and are concerned with systems of ethics, that is, of right and wrong. In some societies, like China, philosophies overshadowed religions; in others, like India, religions overshadowed philosophies. If there is a connection between the simultaneous rise of classical civilizations and of the world's religions, it can probably be found in the idea that all the great religions of the world deal with patterns of ethics. Ethics tend to order human relationships. Successful ordering leads to successful systems of human interaction and successful systems of society. The arts glorify belief in these systems. When classical civilizations reach a high point of cultural achievement, it is called a Golden Age. All classical civilizations have left a lasting legacy of human experience, and for that reason, they are an important part of the historical memory of the world.

Common to the classical experience were political systems with institutionalized bureaucracies and armies often tied to religious hierarchies. Political leadership became systematized and legitimized by ideologies of power. Classical systems of thought that backed existing political leadership also legitimized wars fought in the name of superior values. Classical economic systems were expanding and complex, linking agriculture and commerce into large networks connected by common currency and rules of exchange; these systems were also sanctified by religious and philosophical thought patterns. Wealth was created by surplus trade and expansion. Social classes evolved into hierarchies of power, prestige, and wealth. Slavery became institutionalized and legitimized. Common also to the classical experience was a tremendous outpouring of art stimulated by increasing wealth, cultural exchange, and cementing of religious tradition. The power and appeal of classical societies caused them to spread, often resulting in large, multinational empires.

It is common for historians to identify six classical civilizations in world history-classical Greek civilization (600-200 B.C.), classical Roman civilization (500 B.C.-A.D. 500), classical Chinese imperial civilization (500 B.C.-A.D. 500), classical Indian civilization (300 B.C.-A.D. 500), classical Islamic civilization (600-1200) and classical American civilization (100-900). The following discussion of each of these six classical civilizations will identify the major streams of intellectual thought, either philosophical or religious. How this thought shaped political, economic, social and cultural institutions that became lastingly influential will then be described. Part I focuses on Greece, Rome, and China.
Classical Greek (Hellenic) civilization's most defining characteristic is its democratic political system. This political system was closely tied to a belief system known as rationalism. Rational-ism is the belief that human reason or intellect is the true source of knowledge. Rationalist thought began with Greek observation and speculation about the natural world. It connected philosophy and science by using reason to interpret both the human and natural world. In so doing, rationalism elevated the status of human beings to the center of the universe. It made the human being "the measure of all things" and helped create a political system in which citizen participation was fundamental.

Greek democracy was founded on the idea of the polis. The polis was not just a city-state or place, but a culture around which a person's meaning, civic purpose, and social responsibility revolved. Each male citizen over nineteen years of age participated in this direct democracy, which passed laws, elected chiefs of state, impeached, and tried cases by jury. As Pericles wrote in 431 B.C., "Ours is an unrivaled constitution. So far from owing anything to our neighbors, it sets the standard for them. On account of its popular basis, it has come to be called Democracy or Rule of the Masses. But, in fact, we enjoy, as between man and man, complete equality of legal status. In our public life individual talent is the one thing valued."

This pervasive belief in the human individual is often referred to as humanism. It affected every aspect of Greek life. Institutionalized democracy is humanism's most enduring gift and the one that gave it life. Humanism is reflected in Greek religious celebrations, the arts, the military, and the economy, as well as in politics. The army's strength lay in the phalanx, a formation of eight ranks of infantry soldiers in which all men marched together so closely that their large metal shields overlapped to form a wall. Here, rank and wealth mattered little. The free, farm-owning citizen-soldier and free maritime commercial trader with enough money to equip himself provided the basis for Greek city-state security. A civilization based on trade must have merchants, manufacturers, and craftspeople. This "middle class" prospered, and in its leisure time participated in the affairs of state and of society. One of the activities of state was honoring the gods. Greek gods were human gods, in the sense that they reflected human attributes—both good and bad. The struggles of the gods reflected individual and collective human nature and were the centerpiece of Greek drama that asked fundamental questions about the human experience, questions about the place of excellence, fate, human flaws, and a person's mastery of self and of the physical universe. Reason and science supported the Greek achievement in the arts. The Greek concept of beauty found its highest expression in the temples, which appear balanced and proportioned from all angles, and in sculpture, which portrayed realistic and graceful individuals.

The hallmarks of the Greek classical period are its emphasis on the human being, on intellect, and on artistic and physical potential for excellence. In the Greek ethical system, to know was to be virtuous. The polis, which institutionalized personal political participation, led to the idea of democracy. Philosophy, in its search for truth through logic, led to investigations into human nature and to scientific discovery. Beauty emanated from a sense of proportion and realism. The Greek way of life, stressing excellence, moderation, the individual, and civic participation, remains an ideal and has become one of the backbones of the modern world experience.

Classical Roman civilization is distinguished by its belief in law-imperial law, God's law, and church law—and by its Christian belief in human love and forgiveness. Whereas Greek humanism and democracy led to the concept of freedom, Roman law led to the concept of justice and human rights.

Early Rome functioned as a republic in which an elected Senate represented mainly the interests of landowners. As in Greece, this system was gradually democratized by the inclusion of other classes of society and by a general body of law called the Twelve Tables, to which all were accountable. It soon became customary for elected praetors, or judges, to announce the laws they intended to enforce and those they considered out of date. In this way, the laws remained responsive to people's needs. These statutes, using precedents, custom, and procedures, became the basis of
civil law, or jus civile. By the third century B.C., when trade had become more important, the Romans set up special courts to deal with the problem of differences between foreign and Roman law. The result -was jus gentium, the coalescing of Roman and foreign law. The judge in charge made decisions that seemed fair, thus promoting the idea of justice as superior to the laws of a particular country. This gave rise to the notion of us naturale, or universal law, a higher law to which all people must answer. The sophistication, adaptability, and sturdiness of the Roman legal system produced a common standard of justice that created a state of laws, not individuals, a systern where judgments were based on evidence, an enumeration of rights, a reverence for law as reflected in the Roman symbol, the goddess of justice, and a concept of universal law.

Meanwhile, in the Judean part of the Roman Empire, a group of people known as Jews had formulated a concept of God's law. Jews believed in a covenant, or pact, between the God of the Jewish people, Yahweh, and his people to obey the law, called the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments and beliefs surrounding them were written down in the Torah, the Five Books of Moses. Acknowledged masters of the law, or rabbis, interpreted the law much as Roman praetors interpreted the Twelve Tables. Christianity evolved when one branch of Judaism came to follow the teachings of Christ. The founder of this sect, Jesus of Nazareth (ca. 5 B.C.-A.D. 29), was himself a Jew who followed the Judaic message. However, Jesus emphasized the importance of brotherly love and the love of God, and of a kingdom in heaven, not on earth. He insisted he taught in his own name, not that of Yahweh. Whereas Hammurabi's Code had taught "an eye for an eye" and the Judaic Law emphasized rules of conduct, Jesus' message was one of forgiveness. "Bless your persecutors... Never repay injury with injury. ... Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil with good." The followers of Jesus, known as apostles or disciples, spread his message. Gradually this evangelical work resulted in the establishment of a church with priests, liturgies, and doctrines of faith like the Nicene Creed (A.D. 321). Using the framework of Roman law and administration, the church was headed by a pope, administered locally by bishops and priests, and guided by a core body of law called canon law.

This genius for law and order, is reflected in Roman arts and culture as well. Statuary and temples copied Greek models, but Roman culture was more practical. Its artistic achievement is reflected in its roads, baths, and amphitheaters, and in its culture of imperial expansion and administration. In the end, when a religion was adopted as a state religion it was for practical reasons. In A.D. 313, Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, making Christianity legal throughout the empire. To better secure the empire, a new Christian capital was built in Constantinople, crowned by the Christian cathedral called the Hagia Sophia.

**CLASSICAL CHINESE IMPERIAL CIVILIZATION (500 b.c.-a.d. 500)**

As the Western world was being shaped by the classical ideas of humanism, law, and Christianity, China was developing a classical culture of its own based on the family, political leadership by divine mandate, and a society ordered by an educated bureaucracy. Three belief systems- folk beliefs, Confucianism, and Taoism- led to these fundamentally Chinese classical characteristics.

The origins of Chinese beliefs can be found in attitudes regarding the individual's relationship to the gods and to nature. In earliest times, the Chinese attempted through various rituals, such as burning paper images, to appease the nature gods. Ancestors were worshipped by the family because they provided the communication link to the gods. Such rituals, embedded in folk religions, are still apparent in Chinese holiday celebrations and festivals, in Chinese astrology, and in continued Chinese reverence for the institution of family.

While in Western thought the individual was viewed as the prime object of the natural order, and in Hindu thought the world of nature was viewed as transitory, the Chinese regarded the relationship between humans and nature as deep and reciprocal. In Chinese thought, heaven, earth, and human beings constituted a single unity governed by the cosmic law, or Tao. Within the Tao, two interacting forces were recognized-yin and yang. Each represented a constellation of qualities-yin as negative, feminine, and passive; yang as positive, masculine, and active. The difference between Chinese dualism and Western dualism is that in the West, the struggle between good and evil, light and dark, and heaven and earth is antagonistic, opposing, and dialectical; in Chinese thought, it is harmonious and complementary. Therefore, instead of light conquering dark and good conquering evil, both light and dark, good
and evil are recognized as complementary parts of a larger whole. Out of this body of philosophical thought emerged two belief systems—Confucianism and Taoism.

Confucianism's major impact was on the Chinese political and social order. Confucianism is more a philosophy like humanism than a religion like Christianity. Confucius (and Lao Tzu, traditionally called the founder of Taoism) is considered a teacher, not a divine being. Confucian concerns are ethical, not spiritual. The thoughts of Confucius centered on the duties and proper behavior of the individual within society. Confucius considered the family the basic unit of society and, therefore, that proper family relationships should be replicated in society at large. In society at large, Confucius identified five relationships (ruler to ruled, father to son, husband to wife, older brother to younger brother, and older friend to younger friend) that were to be ordered on the basis of filial piety or respect for one's parents or elders, and on li, or proper conduct. This, in turn, led to respect for age and to hierarchies of authority. A Confucian gentleman was a man of integrity, education, culture, and proper conduct. Because gentlemen were made, not born, aristocratic birth was not required. These beliefs led to the core principles of the Chinese classical imperial system—the mandate of Heaven and rule by a civil service of mandarin bureaucrats educated in Confucian classics.

According to the mandate of Heaven, which was originally used by the Zhou leaders to justify overthrow of the Shang dynasty, a good ruler was thought to possess a divine right to govern. If a ruler governed badly or was immoral, the people could rise up in revolt. Good and bad rulers produced a dynastic cycle of rulers, but never did this cycle disrupt the basic, cosmic order of rule legitimized by me heavenly mandate. Nor did dynastic changes disrupt the basic civil service bureaucracy of rule. A system of state examination to choose scholar-bureaucrats called mandarins to run the state was originated during the Han dynasty and liberalized during the Tang dynasty into a system based on merit, rather than noble birth. Mandarins soon became the highest class in society and the one to which all upwardly mobile people aspired. Their power was based on privilege and education, not on wealth or military prowess. In fact, both internal and external military concerns were considered anathema to Confucian rule and a symptom of the breakdown of Confucian order. Thus, the classical Chinese approach to foreign policy was China-centered and tributary. Instead of outright confrontation, the Chinese attempted to create a world order by setting up a series of foreign relationships based on tribute. At the center was China, and surrounding China were a series of states that gave tribute and received gifts based on - their political and economic importance to the Chinese state.

Meanwhile, Taoism influenced the science, technology, and arts of China. Taoism is often considered the yin side of Confucianism. Taoism and Confucianism intersected in the belief that imbalance in the natural world, such as floods or famine, could disrupt the political order, just as unwise political rule could lead to natural disasters. They also intersected in their devotion to education and to the establishment of harmonious relationships between human beings and between human beings and nature. The Tao was not a code of social conduct, but a set of values that would allow a person to live in harmony with nature. This involved knowing the laws of nature and flowing with them rather than reordering them. Thus, for the Taoist, the best ruler was the one who governed least. Chinese emperors were noted for their seclusion. Secluded Taoist scholar-monks studied time and fashioned time machines, invented block printing, experimented with metals and chemicals, developed natural resource extraction techniques, designed canals and ships, and invented the compass. They also developed a poetic and artistic tradition centered on nature. Poetry's metaphors were most often natural phenomena, and the classic Chinese silk screen portrays the individual as a small, insignificant object in large, harmonious landscapes.

The Chinese classical period established the major patterns of Chinese government, culture, and thought. Legitimization for rule, the mandate of Heaven, and dynastic cycles, begun by the Zhou dynasty, were formalized by Confucian scholars under the Han dynasty. The idea of a state run by Confucian-trained scholar-bureaucrats, selected by merit testing, matured under the Han rulers and is, perhaps, Chinese civilization's most important and enduring legacy. Dynasties came and went, but Confucian values of filial piety, proper conduct, and education gave hierarchical and civil order to the state. In its Taoist tendencies, Chinese civilization encouraged invention, literacy, scholarship, technological advances, and artistic achievement.

The classical characteristics of India are not found in the polis, as in Greece, the bureaucracy, as in China, the empire,
as in Rome, or the rule of diverse peoples, as in Persia. Rather, they can be found in the social fabric of India, the caste. Fundamental to Hinduism, caste served as the measure of both political and socioeconomic order. The upper caste, the Brahmins, essentially provided leadership through influence over local lords. Hinduism's relationship to a broader universe encouraged Indians to connect themselves closely with the earth and life, rather than with nature and the universe. Buddhism infused a needed measure of compassion into Hindu thought, and it inspired art and architecture and democratized education, but in India it ultimately was absorbed into Hinduism. The rise of the Mauryan and Gupta empires can be closely related to wealth built up by overland and sea trade with the other empires that flourished at the same time. In the contest between trade, which nourished Buddhism, and agriculture, which nourished Hinduism, agriculture triumphed, and Buddhism flourished outside of India. Where Buddhism triumphed, it created classical civilizations of its own, as in Cambodia and Japan.

**CLASSICAL INDIAN CIVILIZATION (300 B.C.-A.D. 500)**

As in the West and China, Indian classicism was closely connected with its society's thought and belief systems. India's spiritual tradition* blossomed in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., about the same time as Greek and Chinese traditions took shape. Indian religious thought gave the world and its own society powerful moral, philosophical, and spiritual belief systems—Hinduism and Buddhism.

The most basic and enduring of the Indian religions is Hinduism. The bedrock of Hinduistic belief is a sacred division of society into castes. This belief was shaped by the Indian view of the universe in which Hindu gods are all reflections of Brahma, the supreme principle of life. The various other deities, such as Shiva and Vishnu, are either aspects of Brahma or ritual vehicles to reach Brahma. Reaching Brahma is the goal of all Hindu life, a goal that can be attained by observing the dharma, the moral duties of one's caste, or religious community. In a broad sense, the "dharma" is defined as following the proper occupation, reaping material gain as long as it is honest and for one's family, and enjoying pleasure and love for perpetuation of the family. The degree to which dharma is observed determines one's karma, or accumulation of good and bad deeds during life. Those who observed dharma could hope to be reincarnated into a higher caste in the next life. When perfection is reached, the individual is released from the wheel of life into unity with Brahma. From the idea of Brahma as the god, force of all life, not just human life, came the tradition of nonviolence toward all living creatures, which was lifted to new heights by Mahavira (ca. 540-468 B.C.) in Jainist beliefs. Not unlike the yin and yang of Chinese cosmic thought, the caste system and the concept of Brahma are two sides of the same core of Hindu classical thought. Religion justifies caste, while the stability of the social system proves the validity of religious teachings. Not unlike Confucian thought, the hierarchical order established by religious thought, in this case, caste, provides the framework for the orderly structure of the state. The Brahmins are the upper caste of priests and scholars. The warrior caste, the Kshatriya, is second. Next come the merchants (Vaisya) and peasants (Sudra). Outside the system were various groups of outcasts and slaves (Untouchables). Caste hierarchy was reflected in the life of every village, each of which became a microcosm of the Hindu order and religious bond. Within the village, each caste or sub-caste was a community that shared religious duties, worked in similar occupations, and helped each other in times of trouble. The importance of villages meant weak central political authority and caused volatility in Indian political life. Therefore, Hindu caste and religion, not law or political procedure, provided the glue of classical Indian civilization. As with Confucianism, the vast literature of Hinduism, as preserved in Sanskrit (Hindu script) and other regional languages, encouraged and elevated scholarship and united the people of India.

The pessimism of Hinduism, especially the necessity of accepting one's fate during one's lifetime, and the endless cycle of life and death, allowed for the appearance of an interloper religion, Buddhism. However, the malleability and inclusivity of Hinduism, and the political and social strength of the Brahmins, eventually caused Buddhist ideas to be integrated into the Hindu system. Classical Buddhism then began to be exported abroad, to China, Japan and Southeast Asia. Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 563-485 B.C.), called the Buddha, was born into the Kshatriya caste.

This was the class below the top and most likely to resent Brahmin privilege. Saddened by the human suffering that Hinduism accepted, the Buddha concluded that happiness in this life could be found not in changing one's karma, but
in changing one's thoughts and attitudes toward one's fate. This could be done by surrendering desire. When desire was extinguished, Nirvana would be reached, thus releasing one from the karma of this life. Desire could be extinguished by following an Eightfold Path to enlightenment. The appeal of Buddhism, like Christianity, is in its egalitarianism. The Eightfold Path could be followed by anyone—noble or peasant, educated or uneducated. Buddhism's emphasis on love, the life of the spirit, and an attainable heaven on earth was equalizing and humanizing. Buddhism opposed the rigid hierarchy of Hinduism and promised to release people from the endless cycle of life. Its success was also related to Buddhist evangelical work by a group of disciples, the Sangha, and by the religion's institutionalization in the form of temples, statues, rituals, and articles of faith, rather than reason.

Two great empires were legitimized by Hinduism and Buddhism, and each empire, in turn, gave state support to these religions. The first was the Mauryan (ca. 324-183 B.C.) and the second was the Gupta (320-467). After centuries of rule by the local prince (raj) and numerous invasions, Chandragupta Maurya defeated the Greek general Seleucus and made himself king in 324. He went on to create a huge empire in northern India, crowned by a magnificent capital at Pataliputra. In statecraft, Chandragupta adopted the Persian style of administration by dividing the empire into provinces. He also established a bureaucracy to oversee taxation and building, created a standing army of half a million, and often ruled by threat of punishment. His secular type rule alienated the Brahmans and reduced their power. Chandragupta's grandson, Asoka, continued the attempt to unite India, but in doing so, he became disillusioned by bloodshed. He converted to Buddhism and created his own building program of Buddhist temples. He also, sent missionaries abroad in order to expand Buddhism and to cement commercial ties. The rule of Asoka coincided with the expansion of the Roman Empire in the West and the Han Empire in China, and with the trade routes that developed across Asia. When Asoka died, the Brahmans who had resented their displacement as political advisors, and the warrior families, who had lost control of their small states under imperial centralization, reasserted their power. Indian rule soon fell back into its feudal and village roots. In 320, Chandragupta I came to power and created a new Indian empire, hi recentralizing the state, he followed a policy of religious, economic, racial, and social tolerance. Gupta rulers soon became patrons of the arts, supporters of advances in science and technology, and builders following Greek, Hindu, and Buddhist styles of architecture. During this Indian Golden Age, Indian numbers (known in the West as Arabic numerals), decimals, and the concept of zero were developed. The technology of fine iron allowed for, development of the scalpel and sophisticated surgery. Both rock-cut Buddhist temples and free-standing Hindu temple complexes reflecting Hindu cosmic design were built. By the end of the Gupta, however, the Brahmin caste and local princes once again asserted their authority.

**CONCLUSION**

The word *classicism* may be applied very broadly, as for instance in referring to classical music, ballet, food, or dress. In a historical sense, however, it refers to a set of recognized and definable characteristics of a given civilization which are deeply imbedded in its particular belief systems, values, and historical evolution. Classic also refers to a certain degree of excellence and widely agreed-upon historical contributions that have left a lasting legacy to future generations. It is important to remember that classicism often represents only part of a given civilization's history. For instance, the Greek classic ideal does not reflect all the diversity of Greek civilization. It reflects the Athenian tradition, rather than the Corinthian or Spartan, and it does not account for a fundamental institution of Greek society, slavery. While any group might legitimately define its own sense of what is classic, the definition should not be confused with a set of ethnic or cultural characteristics. Rather, a classic ideal embraces larger and more powerful memes and ideas that have transformed its own population, the many populations it has touched, and succeeding world generations.

This lecture has emphasized how important belief systems are in shaping the classic ideal. Beliefs set the stage for political, economic, social, and cultural institutions, and for ethical patterns. Belief systems legitimize governments, pattern class structure, and influence the arts. For students of history, making distinctions between various classical systems and ideals can enrich understanding and promote appreciation for different peoples the world over.

* From *Enrichment Lectures* series West educational Publishing 1998.
* Textbook References: *World History, The Human Odyssey*: Ch. 4, 5, 6; *World History to 1800*: Ch. 4, 5, 6; *Modern World History*: Ch. 1, 2