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## The Role Of Greco-Christianity In Preserving Ancient Aristocratic Cultural Values

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### Abstract

Historical evidence shows that Christianity survived Greco-Roman civilization to become its cultural heiress. In this paper, we focus on the Greco-Roman social values assimilated and transmitted by Christianity, leaving aside the institutional and political dimensions of the process. We are interested in the system of values because, as values determine peoples' everyday lives, they transfer us directly to the domain of morality. Thus, the ancient Greco-Roman moral legacy takes on more importance than the political one (democracy). The quintessence of this archaic moral legacy resides in the idea of *agathós* (the superior man), an idea assumed by Greek (Athenian) democracy and inherited by Rome before being incorporated into the Christian doctrine and passed onto the bourgeoisie, who made it part of the culture of modern democracies.

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### 1. Introduction

The fact that the ancient Greco-Roman order is at the origins of Western culture is not only a historical but also an epistemological reality. Some of the central principles of our civilization today are built on concepts inherited from ancient Greece and Rome, such as, for example, those of moral difference, empire, world and humanity. To both the Greeks and Romans, the concepts of 'empire' and 'world' do not only coincide in a physical or geographical sense, but also mutually condition each other's existence: it is widely accepted that the empire created the world by endowing the life of amorphous spaces and communities with a sense of organization and universality. To the Greeks and Romans, the human space, or the world, existed only in politically organized communities. The

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logic behind this thinking is clearly summed up by the stoic philosophers: all things are ruled by the material principle and by the logos, which moves and regulates it; the universe is therefore ruled by a rational principle; the world is a rational animal, animated and intellectual; God is rational, immortal, perfect and intelligent; ‘destiny governs world’; and human beings are ‘rational animals’ acting according to ‘common law’ or ‘right reason’, which is actually the positive law that governs the life of the community. This is particularly important if we bear in mind that all Greek and Roman moral and spiritual life was focused in the State (Buckhardt, 1998:288). From this perspective, the world existed only in communities ruled by right reason, common law, positive law, where the inhabitants, acting according to rational principles, respected political organization, institutions and rules.

Aristotle is one of the main representatives of this doctrine with his concept of *Zoom Politikon*, according to which only the men who live in the Polis or *civitas* live in the space where they can develop their capacity and potential, their humanity –they have *logos*, language and rationality (see Aristotle, 1998, 2000; Campaña, 2010). Given that the only cities with the status of *Polis* and *civitas* were Athens and Rome, this implies that the only human beings, strictly speaking, were the Greeks and Romans; those who lived outside the *Polis* were not considered humans and could legitimately be enslaved.

These aristocratic concepts are summarized very clearly by Kagan (1991:97): “Since they [the barbarians] had not been raised as free men in free communities, but lived as subject to a ruler, they were manifestly slaves by nature; so it was perfectly all right to dominate and enslave them in reality”. According to this thinking, humanity is not a biological issue and dignity is not a mere consequence of existence. This aristocratic principle was so strong that it applied even to other inhabitants of Athens and Rome, who were not all treated as equals: slaves, foreigners and women did not form part of the political community and did not have a civil existence, as “they all lacked what Aristotle called *timai*, or political status” (Riesenberg, 1992: 28). Neither were the other Greek and Roman citizens equal, as there was a distinction between the *aristoi*, men of superior character, and the rest: the inferiors and the poor (see also Plato, 1992 and Aristotle, 1998).

The influence of Greek and Roman thought can also be found in the Christian doctrine and the institutional organization of the Christian church; starting with St. Paul in the year 60 AD, Christianity embraced a concept of universality similar to the stoic. This idea of the universality of action and human destiny, which was at the basis of the Greco-Roman idea of empire, was also fundamental in the development of Christian thought. For centuries, in the European conscience empire, Christianity, world and humanity were all inextricably linked as one, where the economic, political and juridical structures (empire) were combined with the religious (Christianity) and the ontological-moral spheres (world and humanity), endowing Europe with a coherent and powerful basis that conditioned its relationships with the other continents.

This paper is structured as follows: in section two we discuss the transmission of aristocratic values through Christianity and the transformation of the Church; section three explains the transformation of its message; and section four presents our conclusions.

## 2. The transformation of the Church

During the first half of the first century AD there was no Church but only communities and assemblies (*eklesies*). In these decades following the death of Jesus, the social texture of Christian communities did not include members of the nobility, with most of the first Christians coming from the low and middle social classes. As mentioned by Jeffers (1999: 194), “the extreme top and bottom of society are absent from the churches of the New Testament... Based on the New Testament, the churches included no senators or equestrians and at most two decurins”. Nevertheless, this social structure began to change gradually as a consequence of the institutionalization process followed by the Church. The conversion of the emperor Constantine and the transformation of Christianity into the official religion of the Roman Empire –with the associated privileges derived from this– was a crucial inflection point contributing to the Roman aristocracy’s ultimate adhesion to the Church. By the middle of the fourth century,

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