

Influences

On Western civilization

The Bible brought its view of God, the universe, and mankind into all the leading Western languages and thus into the intellectual processes of Western man. The Greek translation of the Old Testament made it accessible in the Hellenistic period (c. 300 BCE–c. 300 CE) and provided a language for the New Testament and for the Christian liturgy and theology of the first three centuries. The Bible in Latin shaped the thought and life of Western people for a thousand years. Bible translation led to the study and literary development of many languages. Luther's translation of the Bible in the 16th century has been called the beginning of modern German. The Authorized Version (English) of 1611 (King James Version) and the others that preceded it caught the English language at the blooming of its first maturity. Since the invention of printing (mid-15th century), the Bible has become more than the translation of an ancient Oriental literature. It has not seemed a foreign book, and it has been the most available, familiar, and dependable source and arbiter of intellectual, moral, and spiritual ideals in the West.

Millions of modern people who do not think of themselves as religious live nevertheless with basic presuppositions that underlie the biblical literature. It would be impossible to calculate the effect of such presuppositions on the changing ideas and attitudes of Western people with regard to the nature and purpose of government, social institutions, and economic theories. Theories and ideals usually rest on prior moral assumptions—*i.e.*, on basic judgments of value. In theory, the West has moved from the divine right of kings to the divinely given rights of every citizen, from slavery through serfdom to the intrinsic worth of every person, from freedom to own property to freedom for everyone from the penalties of hopeless poverty. Though there is a wide difference between the ideal and the actual, biblical literature continues to pronounce its judgment and assert that what ought to be can still be.

On the modern secular age

The assumption of many people is that the Bible has lost much of its importance in a secularized world; that is implied whenever the modern period is called the post-Judeo-Christian era. In most ways the label is appropriate. The modern period seems to be a time in which unprecedented numbers of people have discarded traditional beliefs and practices of both Judaism and Christianity. But the influence of biblical literature neither began nor ended with doctrinal propositions or codes of behaviour. Its importance lies not merely in its overtly religious influence but also, and perhaps more decisively, in its pervasive effect on the thinking and feeling processes, the attitudes and sense of values that, whether recognized as biblical or not, still help to make people what they are.

The deepest influence of biblical literature may be found in the arts of Western people, their music and, especially, in their best poetry, drama, and creative fiction. Many of the most moving and illuminating interpretations of biblical material—stories, themes, and characters—are made today by novelists, playwrights, and poets who write simply as human beings, not as adherents of

any religion. There are two views of the human condition that scholars have attributed to biblical influence and that have become dominant in Western literature.

The first of these is the view that the mystery of existence and destiny is implicit in every man and woman. In contrast to the canons of classical tragedy, a person of any rank or station may experience the extremes of happiness or misery, exaltation or tragedy. An aged Jew of Rembrandt's paintings or an illiterate black woman of Faulkner's novels can reach the height of human dignity. The arts also put down the mighty from their seats and exalt those of low degree. Any man may be Everyman, the symbol of all human possibility.

The second view of the human condition is that the time of encountering all reality is now, and the place is here, in man's workaday activities and contingencies, whatever they may be. To be human is to know one short life in mortal flesh, in which the past and future are dimensions of the present. It is now or never that the choice is made, the offer of the gift of life accepted or declined. Any kingdom there is must be entered at once or lost forever. It is here in the actual situation of work and play, of love and need, and not in some far-off better time and place, that the crisis is reached and passed, the issue settled, and the record closed.

These views, though here stated in language that has theological overtones, are not confined to adherents of Judaism or Christianity. They are characteristically Western views of the human condition. That they can be put in words reminiscent of the Bible indicates that the representation of man in Western literature is indeed conditioned by biblical literature.