

WHAT IS AMERICAN CULTURE?

Written by Calvin Fox

Wednesday, 22 October 2014 16:07 - Last Updated Wednesday, 22 October 2014 16:09

Popular versus Essential Culture

The topic of Culture has multiple definitions and dimensions. Many specialists have their unique perspectives: Historians, Sociologists, Anthropologists, Psychologists, Language and Communication experts--social scientists of many kinds.

There are also Missionaries, Philosophers and Theologians, as well as Politicians and Business Leaders who study and write about "Culture" (especially about multi- and cross-culture issues). All these, often conflicting studies and experts, can be very valuable, but daunting. I will try to be simple without being simplistic.

A distinction must be made between culture which is essential and which is non-essential.

Popular Culture generally, among all peoples, encompasses innovations and creativity- a very broad range of preferences and tastes in manners, food, clothing, music, decorative arts, customs and traditions such as Rites of Passage (eg- coming of age rituals, weddings, anniversaries, birthdays). There is, and should be, a lot of diversity in all of these matters, but they are all peripheral, not unimportant, but non-essential.

Essential Culture consists of those very basic core beliefs, morals and values that are shared in common by any group of people and that bind them together. They are essential to its identity and existence.

This includes Language.

"American Culture"

It can be demonstrated that what has been considered to be uniquely "American" Culture, both essential and peripheral, has been dominated by the beliefs, morals and values of Christianity,

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Capitalism and Democracy: specifically Protestant Christianity, Capitalism that came out of Puritan Protestantism and a Democracy that was shaped by Christian religious values. This Protestant domination of American Culture ended in the mid-1930's. There is incessant debate over the separation of Church and State [originally understood to be about the legal, official establishment or restraint by the Federal Government of a particular Christian Church Denomination-never about Religion as such]; but the influence of Protestantism and by extension, Judeo-Christian Values, has historically been inseparable from "American" Culture.

However, this Culture has seen many changes. Robert Crunden's book, *Brief History of American Culture*

[352pp] is organized around those changes: Local Culture (cities and communities) from the beginning until 1850; Sectional Culture until the election of Theodore Roosevelt in 1901 with competition between Northern Culture and Southern/Western Culture in which the North and its values became dominant.

This Northern Culture is the one that became commonly considered to be "American" Culture. It became and remained the national culture until World War II. It was identified with white, Anglo-Saxon Christian "Civilization", incorporating the legal traditions and laws and language of England with personal ("Victorian") morality (eh-Temperance) and religious practices (eg keeping the Sabbath) as well as with Capitalism. Public Schools were expected to promote and help build this Christian Civilization and it was considered to be America's privilege and God-given responsibility to spread this Christian Civilization world-wide.

However, since the 1940's, American Culture has become increasingly pluralistic in Religion and morality, multi-cultural (especially through immigration), cosmopolitan (urban) and international (with ever-increasing world travel and multi-national commerce). Never monolithic, the Protestant hegemony over American Culture came to an end some 75 years ago. However, Christian Culture remains.