

# CULTURE MATTERS: HOW VALUES SHAPE HUMAN PROGRESS

Edited by Lawrence E. Harrison & Samuel P. Huntington  
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As Reviewed by  
**Bowen H. "Buzz" McCoy, CRE**

## RELATED READING RECOMMENDED BY THE REVIEWER

- DALAI LAMA  
*Ethics for the New Millennium*
- HANS KUNG  
*A Global Ethic and/or  
Global Responsibility*
- *United Nations Declaration on  
Human Rights*
- LAURA NASH  
*Good Intentions Aside*
- IAN MITROFF  
*A Spiritual Audit of Corporate  
America*
- MAX WEBER  
*Protestant Ethics and the Spirit  
of Capitalism*
- SAMUEL P. HUNTINGTON  
*The Clash of Civilizations and the  
Remaking of the World Order*
- FRANCIS FUKUYAMA  
*Trust: The Social Virtues and  
the Creation of Prosperity*

**C**ulture Matters is a collection of 22 papers concerning the role of culture in human life. The papers were submitted at a symposium, "Cultural Values and Human Progress," which took place at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Cambridge, MA, in April 1999. The symposium was sponsored by the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies. The purpose was to explore the link between culture and political, economic, and social developments.

The presentations focused on five major issues: 1). The link between values and progress; 2). The universality of values and Western "cultural imperialism;" 3). Geography and culture; 4). The relationship between culture and institutions; and 5). Cultural change.

Several papers focus on the work of Max Weber and his seminal book, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber's thesis was that Protestantism promoted the rise of modern capitalism because it embraced an ethic of everyday behavior tied to economic success. He further stated that opening up the Bible to the masses greatly enhanced literacy, and the Protestants' preoccupation with time further supported their adaptability to capitalism. Weber stated that religion supported the deep values of society which either hinder or enhance economic growth. Societies which provide opportunities for the rich, which

he termed "pharisaic," are more likely to promote economic growth than those which favor the poor, which he termed "publican."

Economists would argue that good policy can override cultural values. This thesis appears to be readily disproved by the current state of the Russian economy. Anthropologists reject the evaluation of another society's culture on the basis of cultural relativism. Yet others state that secularism, individualism, and science may not be as useful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as they have in the 20<sup>th</sup>. Such institutions as religions, tribes, and cultures persist in their shaping of individual values and desires.

There is a consensus among the papers that attitudes, values, and beliefs shape culture, which in turn shapes human behavior and has a major impact on economic progress. Ethics and values can give a society motivation to forgo instant gratification for long-term goals, including economic growth. Trust and shared values are a precondition for sustained growth. Religion can determine the level of corruption in a society. A society ruled by justice and the rule of law is much more likely to produce sustained growth than one is which does not share such values.

Following Weber's thesis, there are cultures, including our own, where many sincerely believe that technology, economic wealth, and growth are deemed to produce the

best life, the most natural life, and indeed even the seeds of personal salvation. Such a virtuous cycle should indeed provide the preconditions to support economic growth, but it is also the source for Third World antagonism and provokes the obvious reaction from "publican" religions. In recent years many groups, (including those organized by the Dalai Lama, Hans Kung, the United Nations, and various business institutions), have come together to attempt to frame a positive global ethic which would provide a moral value system for economic growth.

One of the papers lists 10 values which distinguish cultures that foster economic growth. They are:

1. An orientation on the future as against the present or past;
2. A positive attitude toward work as against work as a burden;
3. A propensity to save and invest as against income equality;
4. Mass availability of education, as against education for the elite;
5. Fairness in advancement as against cronyism and connections;
6. Trust in a broad range of extended communities as against trust primarily in the family;
7. A strong ethical code and a relative absence of corruption, without resorting to sanctions;
8. Justice and fair play as against who you know and how much you pay off;
9. Dispersed authority and broad empowerment as against hierarchy and command and control systems; and
10. Religion as essentially a private matter allowing for plurality and dissent as against orthodoxy and conformity.

Two opposing world views emerge from these papers. The first,

that of Francis Fukuyama, is that the West will come to dominate world culture, through economic power, military might, the globalization of money and capital markets, the English language, the Internet, telecommunications, and the force of Western cultural exports. The countervailing argument is that of Samuel Huntington, which is that Western economic imperialism will cause other cultures to revert to their traditional distinctiveness. The West is unique, but not universal. Other civilizations need not be like us to be modern. Such reversion to traditional values may cause increased global strife, terrorism, and the like.

A more moderate view is that cultural differences and unique and distinctive products and services should be celebrated. Economic growth is heavily influenced by values and religions; but perhaps more important are such factors as geography, history, and the development of institutions. We may end up with strong global markets and institutions heavily shaped by the Judeo-Christian, Western, Protestant ethic and a plurality of local markets and institutions, separate and diverse, retaining a unique sense of identity and a desire for enhanced wealth. Such a third way might be termed universalism without uniformity, allowing for pluralism, where culture can continue to override consumption.

In a world that is growing increasingly global and complex, peopled by those of diverse religions and cultural values, how do we come together? We can come together in our consumerism or in our desire to be entertained, but these are connections at only the superficial, surface level. To come together at our level of deepest meaning, we must have

an understanding of the deep beliefs which we share, and the deep beliefs which divide us. Perhaps the most important challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is what use we make of our religious beliefs, and whether, ultimately, they bind us together or divide us in an unceasing struggle.<sup>REI</sup>

#### ABOUT OUR REVIEWER

**Bowen H. "Buzz" McCoy, CRE**, is past president of *The Counselors of Real Estate*. In addition to professional activities, he teaches business ethics at graduate business schools. He also teaches adult education classes in Christian theology and ethics in local churches and at the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley, California.

