



Book Review: “Why We’re All Romans”

When it comes to the totality of our lives, Americans (and all Westerners) are culturally Hebrew, Greek, and Roman. We owe our intellectual inheritance to Athens, our religious attitude to Jerusalem, and our legal, administrative, and political acumen to Rome. In his new book, *Why We’re All Romans*, historian Carl J. Richard, argues that the complex composition of Westerners depends on Rome and the influence of its empire for our diversity.

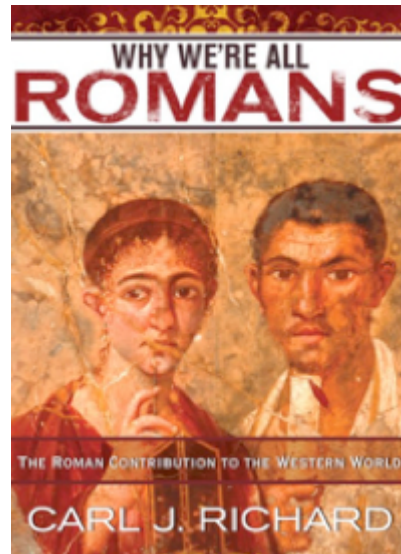
Richard is a professor at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. His academic specialty is the intellectual history of the United States, specifically how the mainstream of classical Roman and Greek history feeds the tributaries of American enlightenment. Dr. Richard has published several books on the subject, most recently *Greeks and Romans Bearing Gifts: How the Ancients Inspired the Founding Fathers*.

To this impressive oeuvre, Richard adds his newest volume, *Why We’re All Romans*. The thesis of this book is nearly identical to that of his previous four contributions: There would be no American Republic had there been no Roman Republic. In fact, a reader could be forgiven for having to check the dust jacket of the book to make sure which of Richard’s books he was reading.

That isn’t to say that the effort isn’t worthwhile; it most assuredly is. In fact, a program of study covering all four of Dr. Richard’s recent books describing the significant impact of the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian world views on the unique American culture is recommended to all friends of liberty. It can be argued that without a firm and correct notion of the genesis of our interpretation of individual liberty and republican virtue, a man cannot be expected to have the weapons necessary of the defense thereof. As the illustrious Edmund Burke once remarked:

Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains on their appetites; in proportion as their love of justice is above their rapacity; in proportion as their soundness and sobriety of understanding is above their vanity and presumption, in proportion as they are more disposed to listen to the councils of the wise and good, in preference to the flattery of knaves.

In *Why We’re All Romans*, Carl Richard sets about the noble task of presenting a roster of wise and good men and principles that informed our ancient Roman forbearers and how their efforts at assimilating all the soundness and sobriety of both conquered and citizen who lived within the boundaries and protection of the *pax romana* gestated. While the Greek phenom Alexander the Great trampled the extent of the known world under the hooves of his Macedonian army, the administration of





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that empire was beyond his ken and it fell to the Roman inheritors of his conquests to devise effective means of maintaining law and order throughout such an expanse populated with cultures of diverse ethnicity and distinct ethos.

Richard cogently and convincingly supports his thesis with compelling evidence of the influence of Rome on the religion (Christianity), administration, law, architecture, and engineering of the West. The author attributes the vitality of this import on the fact that although they were conquerors, the Romans humbly and gratefully took the best notions of perfections found in their dominions, repackaged them, and exported them to the wider world held dominated by the government of Rome.

There are two principal reasons for Roman ascendancy cited by Dr. Richard. First, there was Rome's enviable location on the Tiber River, within 20 miles of the Mediterranean. Additionally, the seven hills upon which the foundations of the Eternal City were famously laid elevated it above the floodwaters that ruined low lying towns that surrounded it. Also, Rome benefited from its position on the crossroads between the Etruscans and the Greeks, from whom they learned so much of architecture and engineering, including the use of concrete and the arch.

The second important factor that contributed to Rome's power was the cultural traits with which it was endowed. Romans, Richard insists, were unashamedly willing to subordinate their individual needs to those of the republic. Moreover, Romans were a freedom-loving people, resistant to the frequent or unjust exercise of absolute power. It was expected that a Roman would voluntarily temper his demands and pursuits so that liberty could flourish.

The source of this selflessness, according to Dr. Richard, is Roman virtue. *Virtus*, as the Romans called it, was the ability to amend one's natural or base desires according to the moral lessons learned from the stories and myths handed down by their ancestors. The amount of virtue possessed by a people, the Romans believed, was in indirect proportion to the amount of government control necessary to be wielded over the citizenry. That is to say, the less virtue was possessed by the people, the more government they needed. The less a people was able to restrain themselves and exercise freedom and personal liberty in moderation, the greater need there was for government coercion and the enforced restrictions on the freedom of individual action.

Religion played a vital role in the molding of a Roman citizen. According to the story told by Carl Richard, Romans were obsessed with performing the rites of their religion with exactness. In fact, Richard argues, the purposes behind the performance was less important than the displacing engendered by strict adherence to the ceremonies.

As the Romans, we Americans have been blessed geographically. Unlike the Romans, however, as a people we have abandoned our public piety. We have jettisoned the devotion to the public performance of rites and sacred obligations that moored our ancestors to the American dogma of discipline and hard work. While it is true that the faith of some of our Founding Fathers was arguably less channeled into this or that sectarian stream, it is irrefutable that they were to a man reliant on the strength they derived from reliance on the performance of public ritual. While such devotion to the demands of morality strengthened the cement that held the Roman Republic together, the foundations of the American Republic is equally enervated by the disregard to the same principle of public piety. This potential was foretold by no less a light than the French observer and admirer of America, Alexis de Tocqueville:

The American Constitution is remarkable for its simplicity; but it can only suffice a people



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habitually correct in their actions, and would be utterly inadequate to the wants of a different nation. Change the domestic habits of the Americans, their religious devotion, and their high respect for morality, and it will not be necessary to change a single letter in the Constitution in order to vary the whole form of their government.

Have we witnessed in our own time the seeds of the destruction of our Republic that were identified by de Tocqueville? Will the mighty republican form of government we inherited in large measure from the noble Romans be enervated and reduced to an American form of collectivist empire because of our disregard for the moorings of morality?

In the final chapters of *Why We're All Romans*, Carl J. Richard examines the role Roman hegemony played in the successful proselytizing of Christianity throughout the provinces of the Roman Empire. While the "good news" of the gospel of Christ fell on deaf ears among the Savior's fellow Jews, the Roman citizen Paul found many willing converts among the former colonies of the Greek empire. Richard ascribes the geometric and geographic growth of the Christian sect to the remarkable missionary efforts the former persecutor and proud citizen of Rome, Saul of Tarsus. Paul took the message of the Messiah to the poor and disenfranchised, who joyfully embraced the liberation offered by the tenets of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Himself born in the Roman colony of Judea.

Richard insists that as the Christian church grew, its appeal was enhanced by the willingness of its Roman leadership to incorporate rather than reject the influence of paganism. Professor Richard writes that, "The veneration of relics and the practice of pilgrimages to holy sites appealed to the deeply ingrained Roman tendency to invest material objects and places with magical powers." It was the vestigial Pagan craving of the mystical that contributed to the "veneration of Mary and the saints," Richard argues. Whether or not one accepts this hypothesis, it is beyond debate that the peace and leveling effect of the Roman way precipitated the rapid expansion of the Christian faith in the first few centuries after the death of Jesus.

All in all, *Why We're All Romans* is an acceptable addition to Carl J. Richard's scholarship on the undeniable influence of the civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean Sea on the government, religion, and mores of the West. The fact is, however, that no one in his right mind would contest the point. Fortunately for Dr. Richard, what his book lacks in originality it makes up for in the elegance of its prose. Richard's mastery of the scholarship in this field lends an engaging quality to his work that for the most part covers a multitude of sins. The most cardinal of which are the absolute (and unforgivable) absence of footnotes and citations to primary or secondary sources. While the book is understandably not targeted at an academic market, even works written for the general public should reference appropriate source material. This weakness is especially conspicuous and enfeebling to the otherwise commendable work in light of the praise heaped upon the Roman proclivity for unpretentiously giving due to credit to those upon whose shoulders they built the world's most influential empire.

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