

## CULTURAL FORMS

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Not surprisingly, generalizations about cultural themes are more challenging, in world history, than those that apply to politics or economics. Major regions worked hard, particularly in periods like the classical centuries, to define successful regional cultural systems and identities, and this means variety, more than commonality, often defines the field. Generalizations about the arts, beyond the important point that every human society has developed and cherished artistic expressions, are particularly difficult, particularly before the advent of regular global cultural interchange.

Another complication, that requires careful treatment, is the distinction between regions that arguably developed their own “great tradition”, and regions that imported parts of their cultural systems from one or more models elsewhere.

For all the challenges, however, some cultural features do allow analysis of larger patterns. Religious history, obviously, is a central theme. All regions developed religions, though a few, like China, ended up with greater stress on secular philosophy. Religions can be compared. Several of them also spread widely, cutting across other cultural boundaries. While religious chronology is not tidy, it is possible to discuss the advent of alternatives to traditional polytheism, and then after the classical period the spread of missionary religions including the advent of the newest, Islam.

Science offers another theme that involves all the major civilizations to some degree, allowing comparisons. The reasons for, and gradual global impact of the Scientific Revolution is a basic historical issue, requiring careful comparisons between Western patterns and those elsewhere, along with the ultimate emergence of essentially a global scientific community.

Education reflects cultural differentiation. But here there are also some important crosscutting patterns. Education in agricultural societies had some common components, including subject matter and teaching/disciplinary style, though religious differences affected offerings as well. The advent of modern education involved deliberate efforts at imitation, and ultimately reflected a number of global standards; they play against ongoing regional cultures.

Overall, exploring cultural themes in a world history context will strongly emphasize comparison and attachment to particular identities. But comparison must allow attention to underlying similarities, and not just more obvious differences. Confucianism and Hinduism, to take two vital examples, were obviously very different; but both served to provide cultural justifications for established social hierarchies, and both did so quite effectively. It's important not to be trapped by differentiation.

Few world history periods are very coherent culturally. The period in which the world religions spread, and exercised great influence over art, probably comes closest to coherence, though with many complications. The modern periods are characterized by unprecedented cultural imitations, from science to popular consumerism; but also deep attachment to separate identities and both persistence and innovation in the key religions.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Why do human societies need such elaborate cultural apparatus?
2. Is it possible to define overall cultural differences between industrial and agricultural periods in world history, or is the subject too complex for this type of generalization?
3. What are some key differences between modern and traditional education systems? Are there any significant continuities?