

# Stoicism and Cosmopolitanism

Although the term *cosmopolitan* (κοσμοπολίτης, literally, *world-citizen*), was used by Greeks earlier than the Stoic philosophers (who started with Zeno [c. 335-263 BC]), it was these philosophers who took this term and gave it a genuine, “cosmopolitan” meaning, a meaning rather different from its modern usage.

## Prior to the Stoics

Asked where he was from, Diogenes the Cynic (c. 390-323 BC) said, “I am a citizen of the world (in the Greek, *kosmopolites*).” The atomist philosopher Democritus said, “To a wise man every land is accessible; for the entire world (*kosmos*) is a good soul’s native land.”

Many Greek Sophists held cosmopolitan views. The Sophist Antiphon (d. 411 BC) wrote that “by nature we are all constituted alike in all things, both barbarians and Greeks. This can be seen by consideration of those things which are essential by nature to all men... In these things no barbarian is set apart from us, nor any Greek. For we all breathe into the air through mouth and nostrils...”

## Stoic Cosmopolitanism

Zeno’s earliest and most famous work, *Republic*, was summarized by Plutarch:

Moreover, the much-admired Republic of Zeno, the founder of the Stoic sect, may be summed up in this one main principle: that all the inhabitants of this world of ours should not live differentiated by their respective rules of justice into separate cities and communities, but that we should consider all men to be of one community and one polity, and that we should have a common life and an order common to us all, even as a herd that feeds together and shares the pasturage of a common field. This Zeno wrote, giving shape to a dream or, as it were, shadowy picture of a well-ordered and philosophic commonwealth....

Another key element to Stoicism, and its cosmopolitanism, was the idea of *logos*, which normally meant *reason* or *speech*. Stoics used it in a divine, cosmic sense to refer to God, and specifically, the way God maintained order in the universe. One of the things that made humankind unique, was that we all share access to reason (*logos*).

Stoics later articulated the concept of two citizenships, that of one’s particular city, state, or nation, and the second, that of the *kosmos* (universe or world).

The Roman stoic philosopher Seneca the Younger (d. 65 AD) wrote that

There are two communities-the one, which is great and truly common embracing gods and human beings, in which we look neither to this corner nor to that, but measure the boundaries of our state by the sun; the other, the one to which we have been assigned by the accident of our birth. (*On Leisure* 4.1)

A later Stoic, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (d. 180 AD), articulated his vision of a brotherhood of man:

If intellect is common to us all, then so is the reason (*logos*) which makes us rational (*logikoi*) beings; and if that be so, then also common is the reason (*logos*) which prescribes what we should do or not do. If that be so, there is a common law also; if that be so, we are fellow-citizens; and if that be so, the world is a kind of state. For in what other common political community can we claim that the whole human race participates? (*Meditations* 4.4; for a longer version of these ideas, see Cicero's *De Legibus* 1.22-39)

This unifying factor among all humans, our ability to reason, was therefore seen (if it was rightly used) as a way to arrive at principles of justice, which later philosophers have called *natural law*. Philosophers much later, such as John Locke in particular, used this idea of a universal code of justice, to argue that we all had certain "inalienable rights" regardless of what the government said or did.

Hierocles, a Stoic philosopher of the 100s AD, proposed a fascinating model and recommendation for the way human beings should regard their personal and social identities. Each of us, he said, should picture ourselves as the center of a series of concentric circles. The nearest circle consists of one's immediate (nuclear) family; the next, one's extended family of aunts and uncles, cousins, etc. The one after that would be neighbors, then one of the same tribe, then of the same city, then of the same nation, and the last one, would be all of humanity.

Hierocles recommended two strategies for reducing the distance between oneself and the series of circles. First, we should draw the circles closer to ourselves, treating the second circle as if it were the first, and the third circle as if it were second, and so on, making the occupants of each circle that degree closer to us. Second, we should use terminology of family for people who aren't related to us, such as "brothers" and "sisters" for people who are similar in age to us, but still not part of our family.

### **Stoic Influence on Christianity**

It would be hard to over-estimate Stoicism's influence on Christianity. First of all, the use of the Greek term *logos* as the preincarnate Jesus in John 1. By the use of this Greek term, Jesus was portrayed as being the Divine Reason through which everything was created. A second Stoic influence in Christian thought is the Stoic emphasis on cosmopolitanism. New Testament writers applied it to Jewish-Gentile relations of their time, stating that everyone, regardless of ethnic identity, could be part of the family of believers in Jesus. This can be seen in passages such as Galatians 3.28 ("There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."), and Ephesians 2.19, where Paul tells the Ephesians "so then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."