

Rethinking Western Civilization

Executive Summary

The study of Western Civilization at Houston Christian University is more than a generic historical survey. Working within a Christian framework, the course presents Western Civilization as the seed and soil of our own culture and society, providing students a framework for understanding their own lives and communities within both the broader scope of human history and the divine plan for the redemption of Creation.

The course builds upon Arthur Link's notion that "Man, a finite creature, can know and understand truth only partially, imperfectly, corruptly, it may be. But by God's grace he can at least honor, respect, and treasure it. That is to say, the historian, while readily acknowledging that only God knows all historical truth, can now affirm, profess, and confess that he stands in the presence of something far greater than himself, something that gives meaning to his life and work."¹

Course Description: This course offers a historical framework for the Ancient World, the Classical World of Greece and Rome, and the Middle Ages, acquainting students with the significant religious, political, and intellectual movements and key people in those periods and emphasizing a Christian understanding of history. The course focuses upon reading and analyzing primary sources, particularly key texts from the Western canon, and developing research skills with secondary sources.

Course Outcomes

1. Understand key aspects of a Christian understanding of history;
2. Explore the significance of particular events and people in Western civilization;
3. Read primary sources closely, employing particular analytical methods of historical inquiry;
4. Apply what is studied in Western Civilization to questions about human virtue and dignity;
5. Develop their own questions and interests through research;
6. Write historical analysis, using secondary sources, with clarity and concision.

Course Distinctives

1. **Textbook(s):** The course encourages students to read broadly, teaching them that historical scholarship is filled with various perspectives, purposes, and people. Part of our enjoyment as historians is to appreciate and participate in understanding these different perspectives. Rather than relying upon a single history textbook, students will be introduced to a wide range of historical works through the HCU Moody Library. Assignments will be built around developing basic reading/research/writing skills with this body of material (e.g. locating sources, using different kinds of sources, developing questions, citation, etc.).
2. **Primary Sources:** The course emphasizes the significance of primary sources, as gateways to our understanding of other people's experiences of and contributions to history. These

¹ Arthur Link, "The Historian's Vocation," *Theology Today*

experiences can be inspiring, terrible, joyful, pathetic, magnanimous, painful, and comic, but they are all experiences of individuals created in the image of God, allowing us to say with C.S. Lewis, “My own eyes are not enough for me; I will see through the eyes of others.”² The course has a common reader of primary sources, drawing from the wellspring of the Western tradition, which includes letters, law codes, scripture, poetry, history, philosophy, theology, and first-hand accounts of historical events.

3. **Integration of a Christian Understanding of History:** Inspired by the University’s Core Convictions, the course is rooted in certain assumptions about humanity and history. These include:
 - a. **Order in History:** That history is not a random series of events. While we often cannot discern the divine purpose and plan for particular events, we know that, like the natural order, history is good and ordered by God with a beginning and an end. We do not deny the reality of awful tragedies, violence, rebellion, and human corruption. In fact, part of understanding the order in history comes from studying the brokenness of human nature and its need for redemption. Instead, we acknowledge in the face of devastation and destruction wrought upon the world by sin that we have hope, and we trust with Jacques Maritain that, “Everything that happens in the history of the world serves, in one way or another, the progress of the kingdom of grace.”³
 - b. **Centrality of the Incarnation:** That the Incarnation of Jesus Christ sits at the center of human history. As Christopher Dawson writes, “the universal purpose for humanity ... [was] finally realized in the person of a Galilean peasant executed under Tiberius.”⁴ The life of Christ marked a fundamental turning point in the history of humanity, altering humanity’s relationship with God and with one another. Not only did the Incarnation transform the trajectory of history, but it also changed our understanding of what it means to be a human being.
 - c. **Imago Dei:** That human beings are more than economic, cultural, and/or political creatures, determined by their time and place. Humans are created in the image of God to be caretakers of Creation, participating in both the material and eternal world. Part of this role includes the preservation and communication of historical truth, and that this truth is something that exists within the context of eternity. Dawson described this as “a vision of history *sub specie aeternitatis*, an interpretation of time in terms of eternity and of human events in the light of divine revelation.”⁵

² C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, p. 140.

³ Jacques Maritain, *The Philosophy of History*, p. 54.

⁴ Christopher Dawson, “A Christian Understanding of History,” *Blackfriars*, pp. 313-314.

⁵ Dawson, “A Christian Understanding of History,” p. 315.