The Development of Western Civilization

Western civilization. That sounds daunting, doesn't it? How do you begin to define something as big as Western civilization? What is it, and what does it have to do with me?

Let's make things easier by breaking it down. When we think about Western civilization, it's a helpful idea to begin with a definition of what we mean by civilization. For our purposes, civilization consists of all the elements that comprise a culture: traditions, religion, politics, art and literature, philosophy, science and technology, and ethical values.

Okay, if that's what civilization is, what's Western civilization? Well, Western civilization is all those things as they have developed in the Western part of the world.

Here's the big picture.

Western civilization originated in ancient Greece, which gave us the first democratic system of government, advances in science and technology, and rich contributions in philosophy and the arts.

In the 2nd century BCE, Greece gave way to Roman rule, which added even more to Western civilization: developments in law, government, engineering, and the arts. Equally important, the Romans helped spread Western culture throughout much of Europe and the Mediterranean with the expansion of the Roman Empire.

In the 4th and 5th centuries, Western civilization expanded further with the wide adoption of Christianity. This made religion a cornerstone of Western civilization.

Christianity was also one of the unifying factors when the Roman Empire deteriorated and fragmented, and the West entered a period of stagnation known as the Dark Ages. Luckily, in the 14th century, Europe rediscovered the rest of its Classical identity and launched a cultural rebirth called the Renaissance, which lasted from the 14th through the 16th centuries.
And with the momentum provided by the Renaissance, Western civilization kept the hits coming, with the Scientific Revolution in the 17th century and then the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th century.

All of which set the stage for the political revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Industrial Revolution, and what we know as Modern Civilization.

Today, approximately 2500 years after this journey began, we can still identify at least seven core ideas and values that continue defining Western civilization.

• Rational thought
• Individualism
• Democracy
• Personal rights
• Capitalism
• Christianity
• Science and technology

Of course, as we look across Western civilization today -- ranging from Europe to the Americas to Australia and New Zealand -- we also see many new, regional and national elements that have been added. That's why Western culture is neither homogeneous nor unchanging. As with all other cultures, it continues to evolve over time.

As you look at our Western cultures today, what characteristics stand out? How would you define Western civilization?

About this transcript:
• Transcript title: The Development of Western Civilization
• Corresponding Lesson: What Is Western Civilization?
• Author and curator: Rob Reynolds Ph.D. for The TEL Library.
• Creative Commons License: CC BY NC SA