

ISS 2105: The Origins of the Contemporary West: I (Ancients to the Scientific Revolution)

I. General Information

Class Meetings

- Spring 2026
- 100% In-Person, no GTAs, 30 residential students
- Monday, Wednesday, Friday: Period 3 (9:35 AM - 10:25 AM)
- Location: CSE 0461

Instructor

- Dr Eloise Davies
- CSE 568
- Office hours: Weds, 10:30pm- 12:30pm and by appointment
- eloise.davies@ufl.edu

Course Description

This multidisciplinary course surveys the big ideas in Western Civilization and the societies and cultures which helped to form them. Students will learn about their cultural heritage by reading and discussing great works of philosophy, history, politics, literature, art and science from antiquity to the seventeenth century. The course starts with creation stories in the ancient Greek and Roman world and ends with the Scientific Revolution. Students will study the roots of modern society in the political and educational ideals of the ancient Greek city-states, Roman

notions of justice and power, the Christian transformation of pagan antiquity, monks and philosophers in medieval Europe, the rebirth of the arts and religion in the Renaissance and Reformation, and the origins of modern science. This course reveals how Western Culture is very much alive in our contemporary society, an inheritance evident in our structures of government, social patterns, cultural creations, religious and ethical belief systems.

Required Readings and Works

1. Required readings will be posted as PDFs to Canvas.
2. The writing manual for this course is R.M. Ritter, *The New Oxford Style Manual*, 3rd edn. (Oxford University Press, 2016). ISBN: 9780198767251.
3. Materials and Supplies Fees: N/A.

Course Objectives

1. Identify, describe, and explain the history and underlying ideas of Western Civilization from the Ancient world to the Scientific Revolution.
2. Analyze primary texts, situating them in their historical and literary context to develop critical interpretations of their significance to Western Civilization.
3. Evaluate multiple perspectives on politics, society, and religion and formulate arguments regarding central debates in these areas.
4. Communicate orally and in writing the contribution of art and literature to the development of Western Civilization, and their significance today.

II. Graded Work

Description of Graded Work

1. Active Participation and Attendance: 20%

a. Participation: 10%

- i. An exemplar participant shows evidence of having done the assigned reading before each class; consistently offers thoughtful points and questions for discussion; and listens considerably to other discussants. See participation rubric below. (R)

b. Class Attendance: 10%

- i. On-time class attendance is required for this component of the course grade. You may have two unexcused absences without any penalty. Starting with the third unexcused absence, each unexcused absence reduces your attendance grade by $2/3$: an A– becomes a B, and so on.
- ii. Except for absence because of religious holiday observance, documentation is required for excused absences, per [university policy](#). Excessive unexcused absences (10 or more) will result in failure of the course. If you miss 10 or more classes (excused or not), you will miss material essential for successful completion of the course.

2. Reading Quizzes: 20% (4% each)

- a. Reading quizzes will be administered during class in Weeks 3, 7, 9, 11, 13.
- b. Quizzes will test students' knowledge of the readings and will contain short-answer, short essay, and/or multiple-choice questions.

3. Examinations: 60% (20% each)

- a. You will take three in-class examinations. Exam dates:
 - i. Exam 1: Friday 13th February
 - ii. Exam 2: Monday 23rd March
 - iii. Exam 3: Wednesday 22nd April
- b. The examinations will not be cumulative (i.e., they will only contain material covered since the previous examination).
- c. The examinations will consist of multiple choice, short answer and/or essay questions.

Grading Scale

For information on UF's grading policies for assigning grade points, see [here](#).

A	94 – 100%		C	74 – 76.99%
A–	90 – 93.99%		C–	70 – 73.99%
B+	87 – 89.99%		D+	67 – 69.99%
B	84 – 86.99%		D	64 – 66.99%
B–	80 – 83.99%		D–	60 – 63.99%
C+	77 – 79.99%		E	<60

Grading Rubrics

Participation Rubric

A (90–100%)	Typically comes to class with pre-prepared questions about the readings. Engages others about ideas, respects the opinions of others and consistently elevates the level of discussion.
B (80–89%)	Does not always come to class with pre-prepared questions about the reading. Waits passively for others to raise interesting issues. Some in this category, while courteous and articulate, do not adequately listen to other participants or relate their comments to the direction of the conversation.
C (70–79%)	An infrequent and/or only adequately prepared participant in discussion.
D (60–69%)	Is inadequately prepared for and/or unwilling to participate in discussion.
E (<60%)	Is wholly unprepared for discussion and/or refuses to participate in discussion.

Writing Rubric

	A	B	C	D
Thesis and Argumentation	<p>Thesis is clear, specific, and presents a thoughtful, critical, engaging, and creative interpretation.</p> <p>Argument fully supports the thesis both logically and thoroughly. Responds directly to the question asked.</p>	<p>Thesis is clear and specific, but not as critical or original.</p> <p>Shows insight and attention to the text under consideration. May have gaps in argument's logic.</p> <p>May miss an important aspect of the question asked.</p>	<p>Thesis is present but not clear or specific, demonstrating a lack of critical engagement to the text. Argument is weak, missing important details or making logical leaps with little support. Is only vaguely focused on the question asked.</p>	<p>Thesis is vague and/or confused, demonstrates a failure to understand the text. Argument lacks any logical flow and does not utilize any source material. Fails to address the question asked.</p>
Use of Sources	<p>Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are well incorporated, utilized, and contextualized throughout.</p>	<p>Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are incorporated but not with sufficient precision and/or not contextualized significantly.</p>	<p>Primary (and secondary texts, if required) are mostly incorporated but with significant imprecision/inaccuracies and/or are not properly contextualized.</p>	<p>Primary and/or secondary texts are absent.</p>
Organization	<p>Clear organization. Introduction explains relevant background and the approach taken to the question. Argument is clearly stated and easy to follow. Details are in logical order.</p>	<p>Clear organization. Introduction clearly states thesis but may lack some relevant background information and/or a clear explanation of the approach taken to the question. Details are in logical order, but may be more difficult to follow.</p>	<p>Significant lapses in organization. Introduction does not adequately provide background information or explain the approach taken to the question. Some details not in logical or expected order that results in a distracting read.</p>	<p>Poor, hard-to-follow organization. There is no clear introduction of the main topic or thesis. Little or no employment of logical body paragraphs.</p>

Grammar, mechanics, and MLA Style	Minimal errors.	A few errors.	Some errors.	Many errors.

III. Weekly Schedule

WEEK 1: ORIGINS (JAN 12, 14, 16)

This week students will be introduced to the central themes of the course. How might an exploration of the major works of philosophy, politics, literature, art, and science from antiquity to the seventeenth century enhance our understanding of the contemporary West? Readings will be drawn from the earliest surviving Greek historians, Herodotus on the Persian War and Thucydides on the Peloponnesian War.

Readings (21 pages):

1. Herodotus, *The Histories* (selections: Xerxes invades Greece, the Battle of Thermopylae), 11 pp.
2. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* in *Princeton Readings in Political Thought*, ed. Mitchell Cohen (Princeton, 2018), pp. 11–20.

WEEK 2: ANCIENT GREECE: THE POLIS (JAN 21, 23)

This week students will explore the distinctive political and social arrangements of ancient Sparta and read selections from Plato's *The Republic*. These classic texts expose students to the political world of the ancient Greeks, including to the centrality of the polis to ancient Greek political life and thought. Students will also study the characteristic civic architecture of Athens, including close study of the Parthenon.

Readings (49 pages):

1. Thucydides, Xenophon and Plutarch on 'Spartan Society', in *The Source Book of Greek History*, ed. Fred Morrow Fling (Boston, 1907), pp. 58–77.
2. Plato, *The Republic* in *Princeton Readings in Political Thought*, ed. Mitchell Cohen (Princeton, 2018), pp. 59–76, 85–95.

WEEK 3: ARISTOTLE AND THE END OF THE CLASSICAL GREEK AGE (JAN 26, 28, 30)

This week students will explore major writings of Aristotle, Plato's student and philosophical heir. Themes will include Aristotelian political and ethical thought, as well as the influential Aristotelian concept of the four causes.

Readings (52 pages):

1. Aristotle, *Politics* in *The Greek Polis*, eds. Adkins and White, 278–318.
2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *Readings in Western Civilization*, eds. Knoles and Snyder, pp. 43–51.
3. Aristotle, *Physics* (II.3) in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle*, eds. S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd and C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis, 2016), pp. 484–485.

Reading Quiz 1: Weds 28th Jan

WEEK 4: THE ROMAN REPUBLIC (FEB 2, 4, 6)

This week students move from ancient Greece to ancient Rome with a series of readings from canonical Roman writers. Topics include Cicero and Cato the Elder on Roman religion and law and Polybius's analysis of the Roman constitution. More than a millennium and a half later, Roman republican thinking continued to shape the way Westerners understood politics and civic life.

Readings (53 pages):

1. Cato the Elder, *The Planting Ritual, and the Harvest Ritual*, 1 pp.
2. Cicero, *The Flamen Dialis*, 1 pp
3. Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, in *Readings in Philosophy of Religion: Ancient to Contemporary*, eds. Linda Zagzebski and Timothy D. Miller (Oxford, 2009), pp. 7–18
4. Cicero, *The Laws*, in *Readings in Western Civilization*, eds. Knoles and Snyder, pp. 143–151.
5. Cicero, *On the Commonwealth* (Cambridge, 1999), ed. Zetzel, pp. 95–102.
6. Polybius, *History*, in *Rome: The Late Republic and Principate*, eds. Walter Emil Kaegi, Jr., and Peter White (Chicago, 1986), pp. 9–32.

WEEK 5: LEADERSHIP AND VIRTUE: FROM REPUBLIC TO EMPIRE (FEB 9, 11, 13)

Students will trace the transition from the Roman Republic to imperial Rome through Plutarch's Life of Julius Ceasar. Students will consider the institution of the emperor through readings from Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. The characteristic civic architecture of ancient Rome will be examined through the close study of the Colosseum and the Pantheon.

Readings (46 pages):

1. Plutarch, *Lives*, in *Readings in Western Civilization*, eds. Knoles and Snyder, pp. 119–127.
2. Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, in *Readings in Western Civilization*, eds. Knoles and Snyder, 159–166.

3. Pliny the Younger, *Panegyric to Trajan*, in *Rome*, eds. Kaegi and White, pp. 135–149.
4. Seneca, ‘On the Private Life’, in *Moral and Political Essays* (Cambridge, 1995), ed. Zetzel, pp. 172–180
5. Marcus Aurelius, *The Thoughts of Marcus Aurelius*, in *Readings in Western Civilization*, eds. Knoles and Snyder, pp. 152–156.

Exam 1: Friday 13th Feb

WEEK 6: JUDAISM TRANSFORMED & EARLY CHRISTIANITY (FEB 16, 18, 20)

The week students will study the transformation of Judaism under Roman rule and the origins of Christianity with the ancient Roman world. Readings include selections on the Judean War against Rome by the first-century Jewish-Roman historian Flavius Josephus, as well as the apologetical writings of Tatian. Students will consider the persecution of early Christians through an account of the martyrdom of St. Perpetua and then examine the ‘triumph’ of Christianity in the Roman Empire through Eusebius’s narrative of the conversion of Emperor Constantine.

Readings (66 pages):

1. Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, trans. G.A. Williamson (Penguin Classics, 1998), pp. 133–178, 374–386.
2. Tatian, *Address to the Greeks*, in *The Church in the Roman Empire*, ed. Morrison, pp. 29–42.
3. *The Martyrdom of St. Perpetua*, in *The Church in the Roman Empire*, ed. Morrison, pp. 52–57.
4. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History (The Conversion of Constantine)*, 2 pp.

WEEK 7: THE FALL OF ROME AND THE CONSTITUTION OF CHRISTENDOM (FEB 23, 25, 27)

This week students will study the aftermath of the fall of the western Roman Empire and the political theology and constitutional structures of early medieval Christendom. Readings will include selections from Augustine of Hippo and the Rule of Saint Benedict on monasticism. Students will also consider the formation of the Holy Roman Empire through Einhard’s account of Charlemagne and examine a capitulary to understand the empire’s religious, political, legal, and administrative structures. The capitulary will be compared to Roman ideas of legislative authority, transmitted to early medieval period through the codification carried out under the eastern Emperor Justinian.

Readings (46 pages):

1. Augustine, *City of God*, in *The Church in the Roman Empire*, ed. Morrison, pp. 97–111, 115–120.
2. *Rule of Saint Benedict*, in *Readings in Western Civilization*, eds. George H. Knoles and Rixford K. Snyder (New York, 1968), pp. 209–216

3. *The Institutes of Justinian* (selections, Book 1: of Persons), 6 pp.
4. Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, 7 pp.
5. *Capitulary of Charlemagne* (802), 7 pp.

Reading Quiz 2: Weds 25th Feb

WEEK 8: CHURCH & STATE I: SCHOLASTICISM (MAR 2, 4, 6)

This week students will examine the 12th Century Renaissance, spurred by interactions with the Arabic-speaking world, through readings by Peter Abelard, Adelard of Bath, and Roger Bacon. The impact of global contact will also be explored through new financial mechanisms, like the *commenda*, and innovations in art and architecture, including Gothic-style cathedrals. The formation of universities will be addressed through papal regulations for the University of Paris. Students will explore the dominant medieval intellectual system of scholasticism with particular attention to Thomas Aquinas.

Readings (46 pages):

1. Peter Abelard, *Sic et Non* (1120), 2 pp.
2. Adelard of Bath, *Natural Questions* (1137), 8 pp.
3. Roger Bacon, *On Experimental Science* (1268), 5 pp.
4. Gregory IX, *Papal Regulations for the University of Paris* (1231), in *Medieval Europe*, eds. Kirshner and Morrison, pp. 339–342.
5. Thomas Aquinas, *On Christian Theology* (c. 1270), in *Medieval Europe*, eds. Kirshner and Morrison, pp. 343–354
6. Thomas Aquinas, *Political Writings* (Cambridge, 2002), ed. Dyson, pp. 1–4, 83–93

WEEK 9: CHURCH & STATE II: TWO SWORDS – SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL POWER (MAR 9, 11, 13)

This week students will continue to study the political theology and constitutional structures of medieval

Christendom, tracing the growing tensions between church and state. Papal claims will be examined through selections from Popes Innocent III and Boniface VIII on the papal monarchy of the high Middle Ages. Secular claims will be explored through readings in support of a variety of alternative seats of authority: the French monarch (John of Paris), the Holy Roman Emperor (Dante, Marsilius of Padua), and the city (Ptolemy of Lucca, Remigio de' Girolami).

Readings (38 pages):

1. Innocent III, selections from *Venerabilem, Novit & Per Venerabilem*, and Boniface VIII, *Clericis Laicos*, in B. Tierney, *The crisis of church and state* (Toronto, 1988), pp. 133–8, 175–176.

2. John of Paris, *On Royal and Papal Power*, in *Medieval Political Theory: A Reader*, ed. Cary Nederman and Kate Langdon Forhan, pp. 161-167.
3. Dante, *De Monarchia*, in *Readings in Western Civilization*, eds. George H. Knoles and Rixford K. Snyder (New York, 1968), pp. 263-270.
4. Marsilius of Padua, *The Defender of the Peace* (Cambridge, 2005), ed. Brett, pp. 65-71.
5. Ptolemy of Lucca, *On the Government of Rulers* (1999), ed. Blythe, Bk II Chs 8-9, pp. 120-125.
6. Remigio de' Girolami, selections from *De bono pacis* and *De bono communi*, PDF. 2pp.

Reading Quiz 3: Weds 11 March

SPRING BREAK (NO CLASS, MAR 16, 18, 20)

WEEK 10: THE RENAISSANCE (MAR 23, 25, 27)

This week students will examine the intellectual and artistic watershed of the Renaissance. Readings this week include selections from the foundational figure of Petrarch, as well as selections from later humanists, including Machiavelli and Erasmus. The contributions of women to humanist culture will also be explored. Students will also consider the works of great Renaissance visual artists, including Michelangelo, Raphael and da Vinci, and will discuss the Renaissance concept of artistic genius through Vasari.

Readings (68 pages):

1. Francesco Petrarch, *Letter to Posterity*, in *The Renaissance Reader*, ed. Kenneth Atchity (Harper Perennial, 1997), pp. 6-11
2. Giorgio Vasari, *The Life of Michelangelo*, in *The Renaissance*, ed. Cochrane and Kirshner, pp. 252-269.
3. Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the Body Politic*, in *Medieval Political Theory: A Reader*, ed. Cary Nederman and Kate Langdon Forhan, pp. 231-246.
4. Isotta Nogarola, 'Dialogue on the Unequal Sin of Adam and Eve' (1451), in idem, *Complete Writings: Letterbook, Dialogue on Adam and Eve, Orations*, eds. and trans. Margaret L. King and Diana Robin (Chicago, 2004), pp. 145-158.
5. Machiavelli, *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy*, in *Princeton Readings in Political Thought*, ed. Mitchell Cohen (Princeton, 2018), pp. 145-166.
6. Desiderius Erasmus, *Paraclesis*, 4 pp.

Exam 2: Monday 23rd March

WEEK 11: REFORMATION/S (MAR 30, APRIL 3)

This week students will explore the foundational intellectual and religious movement of the early modern period, the Reformation. Readings will focus particularly on the revolutionary reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. This week students will also consider works of the great Northern Renaissance visual

artists, including van Eyck, Dürer, Holbein and Bruegel. The Catholic and Counter Reformation will be approached through the decrees of the Council of Trent.

Readings (77 pages):

1. Martin Luther, *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, in *Readings in Western Civilization*, eds. Knoles and Snyder, pp. 375–383.
2. Martin Luther, ‘On Secular Authority: how far does the Obedience owed to it extend?’, in Martin Luther and John Calvin, *On Secular Authority*, ed. Harro Höpfl (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 3–42.
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in *The Renaissance*, eds. Cochrane and Krishner, pp. 366–386.
4. *The Decrees of the Council of Trent*, in *Readings in Western Civilization*, eds. Knoles and Snyder, pp. 400–406.

Reading Quiz 4: Friday 3rd April

WEEK 12: RESISTANCE AND SOVEREIGNTY (APR 6, 8, 10)

This week will be dedicated to the Reformation’s most violent legacy, the era of European religious wars. The focus will be on the texts produced by the awful religious civil wars of France. After discussing the historical context of the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, students will examine two important texts of political theory: *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos*, a resistance tract, and the theory of sovereignty formulated in response by Jean Bodin.

Readings (53 pages):

1. Philippe Duplessis-Mornay, *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos*, in *Early Modern Europe: Crisis of Authority*, eds. Eric Cochrane, Charles M. Gray and Mark A. Kishlansky (Chicago, 1986), pp. 103–137.
2. Jean Bodin, *Six Books of a Commonweale*, in *Early Modern Europe*, eds. Cochrane, Gray and Kishlansky, pp. 240–257.

WEEK 13: EXPANSION & SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION (APR 13, 15, 17)

This week addresses two interrelated transformations that shaped the early modern world: global

expansion and the intellectual and technological shifts known as the ‘scientific revolution’. Readings from Francis Xavier will address the role of missionary work and readings from Las Casas and Sepúlveda will explore the moral and political debates surrounding the conquest of the Americas. Finally, students will examine early mercantilist thought through Thomas Mun and consider John Winthrop’s reflections on liberty in a colonial setting. Finally, we will discuss the rise of the anti-Aristotelian new science of early modern Europe.

Readings (38 pages):

1. St. Francis Xavier, *Letter from Japan to the Society of Jesus* (1552), 4 pp.
2. Juan Sepúlveda, *Treatise on the Just Causes of War Against the Indians*, 7 pp.
3. Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Apologetic History of the Indies*, 8 pp.
4. Thomas Mun, *England’s Treasure by Foreign Trade*, in *The Western Tradition*, Vol. 2, ed. Eugene Weber (D.C. Heath & Co, 1990), pp. 399-406.
5. John Winthrop, Little Speech on Liberty (1639), in *American Political Thought*, eds. Isaac Kramnick and Theodore Lowi (New York, 2009), pp. 20-23.
6. Francis Bacon [selections], in *Science in Europe, 1500-1800*, pp. 142-148.

Reading Quiz 5: Weds 15th April

WEEK 14: CONCLUSIONS (APR 20, 22)

The concluding discussion will look back over the themes of the course.

No Readings

Exam 3: Weds 22nd April

IV. Required Policies

UF Academic Policies & Resources can be found [here](#).