The Student Syllabus – Western Cultural History to 1850

Working from *A Moral History of Western Society* – Volume One
Questions to consider in doing the readings

Unit 1 - pp. 1-30 (Introduction and Overview)

Why is a sense of social purpose so important to any society? What was it that the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle observed as making for a good society ... but also a bad society? Why does leadership of a society seem to vary widely over the generations?

Unit 2 - pp. 31-71 (The Ancient Greek Legacy)

Who were the Greek Materialists (principally Thales and Democritus) and what was their understanding of the cosmos and human life? How did Pythagoras hold a quite different idea of the cosmos and how it operates? What was the Logos all about? What were the good points – and the flaws – involved in Greek democracy? Who were the Sophists and what was their impact on Athens? How well did Socrates fare under Athenian democracy? What were Plato's thoughts on the subject of the perfect Republic? How did Aristotle depart from his teacher's idealism to add greatly to materialism?

What was the cause of the foolish wars (the Peloponnesian Wars) that devastated Greece, and started its decline? How did the Cynic Diogenes take a much less optimistic view about man's abilities to understand and manage life? How were the Skeptics even more pessimistic? How did Epicureanism and Stoicism take the understanding of life down different paths?

How was it that Alexander came to the rescue of Greece culture ... but transformed it greatly in expanding the Greek world the way he did? Why did his empire divide into major empires of their own? How did Greek science flourish under the Alexandrian impact?

Unit 3 - pp. 72-107 (Ancient Rome)

In what key ways did the Greek and Roman social-cultural character blend ... but also differ? What were the key ingredients involved in the grand political expansion of Rome? What was the process that produced the transformation of Rome from a republic to an empire? What was it that began the decline of the Roman Empire? What were the "reform" efforts undertaken to pull Rome out of its quite obvious decline?

Unit 4 - pp. 108-127 (The Jewish Legacy)

How was it that the American understanding of the ancient Jewish covenant played a key role in the founding of America? How did/does the story of the fall of Man (Adam and Eve) play such a strong role in the Western understanding of human nature ... and its challenges? Why is the long Biblical narrative of a people's successes and failures considered to be a very important source of lessons about life ... lessons useful for all people?

How was it that Judaism became a religion very, very different from the religions practiced widely around the ancient world? How did this free up the Jews to carry their religion far from their "home base" at Jerusalem? What problems hit Judaism hard with the Alexandrian Greek success in their Jewish world? What kind of a "Messiah" were they expecting ... that would deliver them from this alien Greek (subsequently Greco-Roman) world?

Unit 5 - pp. 128-153 (The Formation of Christendom)

How was it that Jesus was such a very different "Messiah" than the ones the Jews were expecting? What were the key elements of Jesus's gospel (Good News)? How did the crucifixion of Jesus plotted by the Jewish authorities most ironically "complete" Jesus's Messianic mission? How did the events following Jesus's

resurrection and then the follow-up anointing of his disciples on Pentecost by God's own Holy Spirit birth Christianity?

How did Christianity follow Judaism as being a religion based on a narrative or story ... rather than on the mechanics of priestly worship at some sacred altar? Why did Christianity spread so quickly and widely around the Roman Empire ... despite efforts by the Roman authorities to destroy this new faith? How did the Emperor Constantine's "conversion" to Christianity not only change Christianity's status in the Empire ... but also its basic character?

Unit 6 - pp. 154-193 (The European "Dark Ages")

How was it that political folly in Rome's imperial circles speeded Rome's decline? How was it also that the Germanic tribes bordering Rome came to be a major factor in Rome's decline in the West? How was it that Christianity survived in the West ... when little else of the Roman Empire did? Why did Rome do a better job of surviving in the Eastern (Byzantine) half of the old Empire? Why did the Irish become such a huge factor in Christianity's ongoing success in the West? But how did ongoing wars in the East with Persia and Byzantine efforts to stamp out all but properly Orthodox Christianity (involving a heavy persecution of non-Trinitarian Christians making up huge sections of the Eastern Empire) produce a political collapse now in the East as well as the West?

Unit 7 - pp. 194-226 (Islam and the West during those Dark Days)

How was it that the Arab prophet Muhammad was so deeply influenced by Christian theology? Why were subsequent Arab Muslim leaders (caliphs and their generals) so successful in spreading Muhammad's Islamic religion around the Arab, Byzantine and Persian world? But how did the Islamic religion itself suffer a deep and bitter (and ongoing ... even to today) split between two religious factions?

How were the Carolingian leaders of Frankish Western Europe able to fend off Islam ... at least in the Western world north of the border with Spain (Spain remaining under Islam for many more centuries) ... and bring some degree of unity among the various Germanic tribes in Western Europe? But how did this Carolingian Empire itself split into key political-cultural societies? How did the Bishops of Rome (the Popes) manage to preserve at least a degree of religious unity in Western Europe?

But how did the Vikings of the North (thus Northmen or Normans) throw Western Europe back into a new round of Dark Ages? Where did Anglo-Saxon England find itself during these days? Why finally brought about the end of its political independence ... now tying it closely to the political developments on the European continent?

World Map Test

Unit 8 - pp. 227-264 (The High Middle Ages - 1)

How and why finally (by the early 1100s) did Western Europe find itself on a political-cultural rebound ... starting up a growth that would continue all the way into the 20th century? What role did the crusades play in this development ... politically, economically, and culturally? Who were some of the feudal kings that played a big part in this development? But how even more important for this growth was the development of the European merchant cities?

How did this development challenge Christian orthodoxy ... and how were the creation of the Franciscan and Dominican monastic orders very different responses to this new dynamic? How then did "Scholasticism" come to develop out of this new intellectual dynamic? How did the West then find itself once again divided along deep Materialist-versus-Mystical lines of intellectual thought?

Unit 9 - pp. 264-291 (The High Middle Ages - 2 / Renaissance - 1)

How did the 1300s bring Europe to something of an amazing cultural revival ... and then be hit mid-century by a devastating plague that wiped out huge portions of European society? And how did a deep political split

over the office of pope — and the rising threat of the Ottoman Turks to the East — threaten to undo further Europe's political-cultural rebound?

How did this rebound nonetheless soon resume ... and continue to impact the material-cultural development of Europe. How did all of this challenge the Roman Church? How did this bring forward amazing artists and writers ... focused strongly on human rather than religious themes in their work?

How did this also secularize greatly European politics at this time (focus political interest solely on power for power's sake) ... promoting an ongoing contest (the Hundred Years' War) between the Valois and Plantagenet families – ultimately serving merely to bring the Tudor family to power in England?

Unit 10 - pp. 291-324 (The Renaissance - 2 / The Protestant Reformation)

How meanwhile was power being amassed in the hands of the rising Habsburg Dynasty ... coming to hold that power across much of the face of Europe (the Netherlands, Spain, Southern Italy, Austria)? How did the city-states or "republics" of Northern Italy attempt to stand their ground in this dynastic contest? How did all of this political greed come to impact the papacy?

How did all of this facilitate the rise of the Turks in Southeastern Europe?

Yet also, how did all of this energy also inspire West Europe's exploration, settlement, and dynastic claim to various parts of the world ... across the Atlantic – as well as around the African coast, and even to points in East Asia?

Finally ... how did this finally (after failed efforts of earlier religious reformers) bring Luther in feudal Germany and Calvin in urban Switzerland to be able to challenge successfully the Roman papacy ... and thus found and build new Christian movements independent of Rome – even in the face of considerable Habsburg imperial and Roman papal opposition? How did the Roman church finally decide to fight this "Protestant" development with its own "Counter-Reformation"?

Unit 11 - pp. 325-354 (The Development of the Dynastic State - 1)

How did this bitter religious controversy also spill over into Europe's various dynastic contests ... as well as urban Europe's valiant efforts to secure its independence from just such dynastic authority? How did this result ultimately in a long-fought ("Thirty Years' War") that exhausted Europe both politically and religiously?

How did the decision at Westphalia in 1654 finally resolve the matter ... by acknowledging Europe's dynastic rulers as "absolutist" authorities, able to dictate whatever political-religious points they wanted to put into place in their own realms? But how did this also mark the beginning of a new, very much more secular, attitude about life and its causes in general (the beginning of "The Age of the Enlightenment")?

How did Russia come to get involved in this European dynamic at this time? How did Bourbon France find itself able to challenge Habsburg Spain as the dominant power on the European continent? But how also did both the English and the Dutch come into greater power at this time? What did the overseas trade have to do with this development?

But how did growing Protestant instincts in England, particularly on the part of the Puritans, both spin off to America a huge Puritan settlement (New England) but also spark a civil war back in England itself? How in turn would Puritan New England come to have a much greater impact on the shaping of on English America than would the more traditionalist (even semi-feudal) Virginia founded a bit earlier?

Unit 12 - pp. 354-391 (The Development of the Dynastic State - 2)

Why was it that European intellectualism in the second half of the 1600s was in such a hurry to set the idea of surrounding life – the earth and even the universe itself – on a purely mechanical or materialist basis?

How did the political-religious civil war in England (not part of the Westphalia arrangement) ultimately have the same impact on England? How did this include a new political compromise of sorts in England (the

"Glorious Revolution" of 1688-1689)? How also was Puritan America struggling to maintain its religious "purity" at this time?

How was it that France was able to come to a position of not only political but also cultural dominance during this same period (the second half of the 1600s)? However, why was France not able to hold on to its dominant political position (though it still remained the cultural model for most of Europe) during the 1700s?

How was it that Prussia and Russia both found themselves playing a bigger role in the European scheme of things in the 1700s?

Unit 13 - pp. 392-415 (Enlightenment ... and "Revolution")

How was it that the cultural-religious dynamics of the late 1600s now played themselves out in the course of the 1700s? What was the significance of the English and American "Great Awakening," of Rousseau's democratic Idealism, but also of English (or British) Pragmatism, at this time? What about Kant's efforts to find a compromise between French Rationalism and British Pragmatism? How did Lamarck move to put modern science on a purely Materialist basis?

Why did the American "Revolution" erupt? Why did the colonials succeed in their rebellion against a powerful British king and his larger, more experienced army? What happened when the French attempted to undertake a similar rebellion against their own French monarchy? Why? Why were the American "Revolution" and the French Revolution so very different in nature and outcome?

Unit 14 - pp. 416-442 (The "Modernizing" of the West - 1)

How was it that the Napoleonic follow-up to the French Revolution — and the dynastic response to Napoleon's challenge – came to plant a strong nationalist mood among the commoners of dynastic Europe? How did the literary Romanticism of the times deepen this mood ... especially among intellectual classes of the various German principalities? How did efforts to bring into existence a unified German state go nowhere in the first half of the 1800s? How were other "national" groups (e.g. Belgians, Poles, Hungarians, Greeks, Serbs, etc.) likewise pushed to dream of their own national independence?

Meanwhile, what was developing over in the Americas ... Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico and English America itself?

Unit 15 - pp. 442-453 (The "Modernizing" of the West - 2)

How, in the meantime, was the moving of life's dynamics to an explanation that everything was a result of "natural" (not divine) causes – from geological, to animal, to human development itself – increasingly the case? How did Marx even "mechanize" man's own political development as a new – and supposedly most compelling – "social science"?

Centuries Test