

---

## **WESTERN CIVILIZATION:**

Half a century ago, Western civilization was a central idea, and ideal, in American political and intellectual discourse. American political leaders frequently said that the United States was the heir to Western civilization and that it had a duty to defend the West against its enemies, most obviously the communist bloc led by the Soviet Union (sometimes termed “the East”).

Today, Western civilization is almost never mentioned, much less promoted, in political and intellectual discourse, either in America or in Europe. When it is mentioned amongst Western elites, the traditions of the West are almost always an object of criticism or contempt. Instead, real discussion of Western civilization is usually undertaken by the political, intellectual, and religious leaders of *non-Western* societies—most obviously, Muslim societies. Indeed, the idea of the West seems to be most charged with vital energy in the excited mind of our civilization’s principle contemporary enemy, radical Islam. The most lively consciousness of the West actually seems to be found within the East. But within the West itself (i.e. the United States, Europe, and also Canada, Australia, and New Zealand)<sup>1</sup> it sometimes seems that the Western civilization of fifty years ago has become a lost civilization today.

### **The Three Traditions of Western Civilization**

Among scholarly interpreters of the West, it has been widely understood that Western civilization was formed from three distinct traditions:

- (1) the classical culture of Greece and Rome;
  - (2) the Christian religion, particularly Western Christianity; and
  - (3) The Enlightenment of the modern era.
- Although many interpreters have seen Western civilization as a synthesis of all

three traditions, others have emphasized the conflicts among these threads.

The first of the Western traditions was classical culture. In the realm of politics, for example, Greece contributed the idea of a republic, while Rome contributed that of an empire. Similarly, Greece contributed the idea of liberty, and Rome, that of law. When combined, these ideas gave rise to the important Western concept of *liberty under law*.

Christianity shaped Western civilization in many important ways. Christian theology established the sanctity of the individual believer and called for obedience to an authority (Christ) higher than any secular ruler (Caesar), ideas that further refined and supported the concept of liberty under law. Christian institutions, particularly the papacy of the Roman Catholic Church in its ongoing struggle with the Holy Roman Emperor and local monarchs, bequeathed to the West the idea of a separation, and therefore a limitation, of powers. The third source of Western civilization was the modern Enlightenment, which provided the ideas of liberal democracy, the free market, and the belief in reason and science as the privileged means for making sense of the world. More particularly, Britain’s “Glorious” Revolution of 1688 emphasized liberty and constitutionalism, while the French Revolution of 1789 emphasized democracy and rationalism. The differences between the Enlightenment in Britain and on the Continent would give rise to important divisions within the West during much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was the case with regard to the Industrial Revolution and the different responses to it: both state guidance of the economy and Marxist ideology played a much greater role on the Continent than in Britain or the United States.

### **The Cold War Concept of Western Civilization**

The Cold War clarified and crystallized the political and intellectual division between the West and the East. The “Allied scheme of history,” the product of the two world wars, was elaborated and institutionalized into what we might call the “NATO scheme of history,” which fit nicely with the Cold War. Almost all of the members of the North Atlantic Alliance appeared to be heirs of each of the three great Western traditions, and they seemed to be comfortable and confident in this identity and role. (NATO did include a couple of cultural anomalies—Greece and Turkey—which were obviously outside some of the elements of the three traditions, and the United States did have another, immensely important ally—Japan—which was obviously outside all three traditions, as well as outside any plausible geographical definition of the West. But these anomalies became acceptable with the argument that each of these countries was now engaged in the grand project of “Westernization.”)

During the first decade of the Cold War, the struggle between the West and the East took the form of a struggle between “the Free World” and “the Socialist World,” as the two antagonists referred to themselves. With the de-colonization of the European empires, a new region, the global South, emerged “between” the West and the East, and now the struggle was said to be between the First World and the Second World for the future of the Third World. Both the West and the East offered the South a particular version of the Enlightenment project, a particular secular doctrine of progress.

The West promoted liberalism, which was largely a product of the British Enlightenment, while the East promoted Marxism, which was largely a product of the French Enlightenment. Significantly, however, the West decided that in its struggle with the East it could not promote

to the South the other Western traditions, classical culture and the Christian religion.

The 1950s, the high Cold War, was the golden age of the Allied or NATO conception of Western civilization. With the 1960s, not only this conception but any conception of Western civilization came under sustained assault, and the Western traditions have been on the defensive ever since. Indeed, by now, even “defensive” may be too strong a term, since today very few defenders of Western civilization can be found within the political, intellectual, and economic institutions of either America or Europe.