

ABSTRACT

THE GREAT CONVERSION: CHANGING FROM WESTERN TO WORLD HISTORY

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It is easier to convert someone to a new religion than to convince historians steeped in the "Western Tradition" that teaching World History rather than Western Civilization is both beneficial and necessary. Opponents of this transition will argue that students have very little understanding of the western traditions that have been most influential in shaping their culture and that including additional materials would only confuse students and require instructors to water down already well-diluted courses.

This view fails to take into consideration the facts that today the majority of America's business and foreign aid dollars are going to non-western areas and that by the year 2110 the majority of people living in the United States will be non-white and from non-western backgrounds. Thus, all of us will be dealing with peoples from non-western traditions as co-workers, students and neighbors. In order to live successfully in this changing world, individuals must have some knowledge of the histories and cultures of both western and non-western peoples.

History departments deciding to make this "great conversion" must also decide how to divide the materials and what type of text they will adopt. Although many institutions teach World Civilization in a two-quarter sequence, at DeKalb College we have adopted a three-quarter division in the hopes that we will be able to give greater attention to important developments, and that the students will feel less overwhelmed. The selection of suitable textbooks was not as easily decided. At present the choices seem to be between texts that integrate western and non-western materials into a broad, global presentation or basically Western Civilization texts that have a few "add-on" chapters dealing with non-western areas.

If you are not teaching World History yet but are considering doing so, the following suggestions may be helpful. Begin planning your transition at least a year ahead of time. During that year invite area experts to conduct short seminars for your faculty. These seminars should focus on key concepts that need to be covered, pitfalls that should be avoided and bibliographical materials. Consider a gradual phasing-in of materials from the non-western areas, integrating only one or two new areas into your present course each quarter. This phasing-in process could also be accompanied by a pooling of information with each instructor developing units on a single world area and then sharing these materials with colleagues. Finally, utilize materials from different disciplines. There are numerous theoretical approaches and readings from anthropology that can be especially helpful and geographical exercises are essential since most students cannot locate the Pacific Ocean on a map.

Like most changes, this one too can be painful, but the rewards are well worth the initial trauma.