

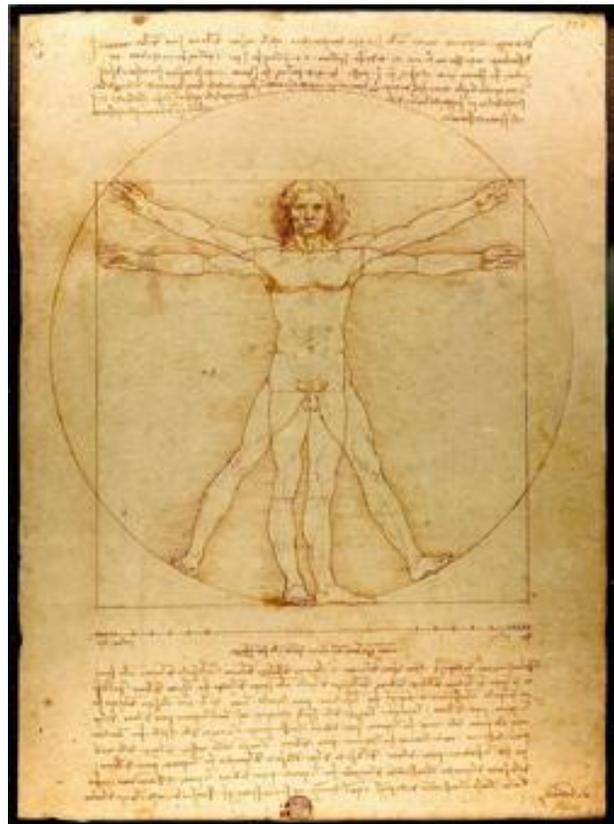
Overview to the Course on the Renaissance and the Reformation

Offered Winter 2015

This third section of our HalifaxThinks series “Five Courses on the West” looks at the most significant development since humans first began to associate with one another in cities at the dawn of civilization. It is concerned with the creation of the Modern World, which process began, some 500 years ago, in Western Europe.

There, for the first time in human history, the primary focus of endeavor turned from the ancient effort to come to a clear understanding of the architecture of the intelligible universe in which we find ourselves. Instead, these Europeans were forced to turn – by both the success – and by the failure of the medieval experiment – to found a wholly new, or modern, science.

This science aimed at developing the most thorough and accurate possible knowledge of the physical structure of both our world and of the entire cosmos. At the same time, a new division began to be made between that universal background of physical reality and another completely independent sphere – a world composed of the things that were caused by human will and intention. Our modern conception of purely voluntary politics, and religion, has its origin in this division.





Our aim, is to follow the astonishing path of Western civilization starting from the moment of the fullest flowering of the Medieval Experiment on Easter weekend in the year 1300. That is the date on which Dante set his *Divine Comedy* in which he summed up all of the elements and forces that had defined both the Ancient the Medieval period. Immediately thereafter *that* blossom began to decay. **This course focuses on the next 300 years.**

In the 14th century, which we treat as the Waning of the Middle Ages, we get to see why the Medieval World collapsed. The century is marked by increasingly frantic efforts to keep the medieval rose in bloom. But, to those who were holding on to an account of reality that no longer reflected what was informing actual events, everything appeared to be infected by a horrible disease in which verities that had held true and stable for a thousand years seemed to be morphing horribly and senselessly into their opposites. We look at in instances of this decomposition in both literature and art.

By 1400CE Europeans had been forced to abandon the assumptions of the Medieval Era. In a transformation that has no parallel in human history they simply set about reimagining the two fundamental poles of the Middle Ages – i.e., this world and heaven; state and church – on the new assumption that they are not outwardly related to one another, as the Medievals supposed, but

exist as separate, though parallel, realities. The Modern World was first conceived in the *imaginings* of the men and women of Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries – and so the art of the period is both the start and a constant theme in all our discussion of the Renaissance.

In the Renaissance of the 15th century, these Western Europeans started to re-imagine the whole of nature and the physical world around them in its own terms – with absolutely no relation to the Church. We look at this in the visionary sense of new human possibilities described by Pico of Mirandola. We see it in earnest, practical, and thoroughly worldly political advice of a totally new kind that Machiavelli offers to his Prince. We find it in the new view of the heavens put forward by Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler as well as in the new view of the earth discovered by Columbus which led to the European conquest of the entire globe, spearheaded by Cortez. Thomas More explores the possibilities of a wholly different social and political reality in his *Utopia*, and we will listen to the beat of a wholly new music.

Finally, in the Reformation of the 16th century, when Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg he started down a path that re-imagined the nature of spiritual reality as totally unrelated to worldly considerations – when he questioned the leadership of the Pope and the fundamental nature of the church. This led to a radical reformation of the church and of human relations to God. Michel de Montaigne and Shakespeare both saw in this new spirituality a new possibility for language and, above all, for a radically new conception of what it is to be a human.

Taken together these three centuries laid down the blueprint of the Modern World in whose latter days we are now living. It is one of the most exciting and pregnant moments of the human experience and the one that can perhaps most help us understand our own times.