

Was the end of the middle ages a sharp break with the past, or was it a gradual C...

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Western Civilization 1 Final Essay TOPIC # 2 Matthew Mark Legg History

1101 : Western Civilization 1 Dr. Andrew Reeves May 2013, Term word

count: 1610 Was the end of the Middle Ages a sharp break with the past, or was it a gradual change? Discuss. Breaking away from the past and forging a new future, a new way of life, is never an easy thing to do. It does not matter if it is on a personal level or civilization as a whole, rarely is it a clean break away from the normal routine.

In the case of the Middle Ages (5th to 15th centuries) shifting into the Early Modern Age (15th to 18th centuries), sometimes classified as the Ages of Discovery and Revolution, is standardly marked by the Renaissance period. This a period in history between the 14th and 17th centuries marked by a re-awakening of sorts by Western Civilization, a movement from the feudalistic organization of Europe into the humanistic culture that balanced a revival of ancient scholarly pursuit with a more secular view of life and new focus on surpassing mankind's intellectual and physical limits.

The transition was prolonged when it experienced pushback by those in power across the rest of Europe and the Papacy. As stated, this period is usually accepted as spanning a few centuries; most would consider this a gradual break due to the narrow vision scope of man as he defaults to seeing his lifespan as an incremental time gauge. History though, sees the average lifespan of a man as a blink of an eye; a few hundred years is a relatively short amount of time. Knowing this, classifying the transition from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Age is subject to how the perceiver distinguishes time.

Is it a comparison or classification of how cultures evolved in the past or raw time passed between major events? The Late Middle Ages saw a great number of events both big and small that signaled the arrival of the new era western civilization was entering. Plague, famine, climate change, near constant war, shifting governments, and shifting perception of the world both physical and intellectual, all took place in such a short amount of time in the grand scheme of things, it is no wonder that western civilization moved into a new Age. oay we see change In such a conaensea Tasnlon t at t n l Is almost an invisible, immeasurable thing. The last century has advanced humanity, not Just estern civilization, by leaps and bounds through technology in the most compact timeline the world has experienced. This would be more appropriate to classify as a clean break from the " old ways" as opposed to the century spanning time frame of the Middle Age to Early Modern Age transition. However, to those living in this time of turmoil and shifting perceptions it would have seemed quite accelerated when compared to similar shifts in history.

Prior to this move in culture and civilization, progress was much slower. Harkening back to the beginnings of this course, the eginnings of civilization from the secluded cultural formations of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Ancient Greece and various pockets of other cultures into the respective empires that spawned from these regional powers took multiple generations. These empires then interacted and melded, fought and separated, dominated and assimilated into an ever changing mix of cultures and ideals.

Once again this happened over a great period of time, culminating in the establishment of a few ancient world super powers like Rome and Persia. These grand powers once again took hundreds of years standing still before transitioning into the next great phases of civilization. The Medieval or Middle Ages came in the wake of the fall of Rome, when Europe broke itself into a dozen or so smaller territories each holding its own idea of how government should function, what amount of control over day to day life the church should hold and so forth.

It is commonly accepted that western culture and civilization basically treaded water for a few hundred years here, even took a step back, hence the vernacular reference to this era as the “ Dark Ages”. I believe that the Renaissance lasted as long as it did due to the mind set of Europe’s various governmental entities. While trade spanned the entirety of the known world, cultural concepts moving from one country to the next were resisted at large by the controlling factions. The monarchies that ruled Europe fiercely resisted anything that may threaten the tenuous hold they had on their territory and people.

The radical ideals that were birthed during the Renaissance did just this; they promoted the human spirit, advocated power to the masses and not the elite and championed equality and individual promotion over the stark class system that dominated the feudalistic structure of Europe. In the book *The West: A Narrative of History* by Frankforter and Spellman they outline these ideals as “ The leaders of the Renaissance broke with ascetic, world-denying

ideals of the Middle Ages by stressing the nobility of human existence and the legitimacy of earthly pleasures.

They glorified in the creation of beautiful things, the possession of rare objects, esoteric scholarship, courtly refinements, and various forms of conspicuous consumption". " The onset of the Renaissance began in Italy, more specifically Firenze (Florence) who was uniquely in position for just such a radical change in concepts. At the birth of the Renaissance Italy was not a unified country, nor was it even a federation.

Italy had reverted to their ancestral background or structure of independent city states with no supreme ruler as the rest of Europe had indulged themselves. These city states were governed by an elected senatorial stylized group of citizens with predetermined service limits, a city council with some executive officers to provide a check and balance system. Hereditary rule was not formally practiced, more a nepotism where large prominent families that provided much of the infrastructure and support these city states required cycled through these offices.

This took place almost overnight and spread like wild fire throughout the Italian city states then screeched to a crawl as it met the resistance of the rest of Europe's monarchical ruling class and the Papacy to maintain their stranglehold on supreme power. Frankforter and Spellman describe Italy's unique composition and position in the following way; " this was supported and encouraged by the great wealth accumulated in Italy... the wealth that Italians earned stayed in Italy, for they had to spend little of it abroad...

Political fragmentation prevented any one ruler or government from monopolizing... kept society open and provided opportunities for some social mobility. Italy, in short, had an ideal environment for the growth of an entrepreneurial middle class of pioneering capitalists who respected talent, industry and ambition. " So you can see where the monarchical governments of Europe are the root of why this new spirit and set of ideals were slow to move away from the Italian birthplace.

Had the leaders of Europe not had their collective heads consistently looking over their shoulder to quell ny threat to their supreme power, but been more accepting of mankind's progression in intellectualism the Renaissance would have swept the western world much like the next cute cat video uploaded to YouTube, maybe not quite that fast, but much faster in any case. The Catholic Church also aided in the stifling of the reformations touted by the Renaissance promoters.

The ideal of humanism and the secular views of self- awareness and indulgence stood in defiance to the Churches death grip on how the people of Europe should conduct themselves in day to day life following the tenants f the Faith. Eventually the Church eased back on a select grouping of the concepts birthed by the Renaissance, mostly in the areas of the Art movements at the time. By and large the Papal office and leaders of the church continued to fight the self- indulgent beliefs that played a prolific role in how people viewed the world, themselves and the reformation of class systems being proposed.

Another factor that weakened the churches defiance of these reformations was the split of the faith, not the schism of a few years prior, but the preachings of Martin Luther and the ventual split into Catholicism and Protestantism. Martin Luther fractured the control the Pope had over the rest of Europe and their actions by proposing that he and the Catholic Faith were hording God's gift to mankind and pandering to worldly desires and influence.

Luther's Sermon at the Castle Pleissenburg does an astounding Job of illustrating how the Pope and Catholic church had taken God's gift and held it hostage over the rest of the world when he said " What is the Christian Church? What does it say and do? They reply: The church looks to the pope, cardinals and bishops. This is not true! Therefore we must look to Christ and listen to Him as he describes the true Christian church in their phony shrieking. Our Papist wants to improve on this, and therefore they may be in peril.

Look at baptism, it is water; where does the hallowing and the power come from? From the Pope? No, it comes from God's commands... Likewise, the blessed sacrament is not administered by men, but rather by God's commands... " In closing, I would contend that the break between the Middle Age and the Early Modern Age lies in the gray are where the sharp break and gradual change overlap In tne Venn Diagram OT nistorlcal timelines. It took a couple nunarea years to run Its course, which seems like a great amount of time to you and me.

However, in the grand scheme of history, when observing the past three thousand years of history, a few centuries are a drop in the bucket. Clean, clear-cut break or gradual change depends on the one holding perspective and context to which it is compared. References and Bibliography 1.

Frankforter, Daniel A. and William Spellman. *The West: A Narrative History*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, 2009. 2. Martin Luther. *The Sermon at the Castle Pleissenburg*