

Position Paper

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1] Logistics of teaching Mediterranean History:

Over the course of just shy of 30 years teaching in universities, I have taught at different times Western Civ. (human origins to 1715), World History (human origins to 1500), and Mediterranean History. To a considerable degree I have followed the advice I remember giving to a teaching workshop for our TAs at the University of Tennessee way back in the 90s—to (quoting here from that forgotten comedian, George Gobel) “play the heck out of the parts you know.” By this I don’t mean that you just teach the aspects of the course you’re already familiar with, but that you use your broader area of expertise to shape what you focus the course around. For me that has always meant playing up the intellectual and religious history of these impossibly broad survey courses. I don’t leave out economic or political or social history, but I focus the course around the issues that I have the tools to talk about with some amount of nuance, even if the intellectual and religious history I’m teaching about on many days is far from anything I have expertise in. Thus when teaching Mediterranean history, I’m weakest on Byzantium, but having focused my course around intellectual and religious history, I feel much more confident of being able to make my students understand, say, the Hesychast controversy than the complex political machinations of the Byzantine court. This means to mean that everyone’s Mediterranean survey should in large part be a reflection of the kind of scholar each instructor is. For some it will focus on economic history, for others on social history, etc. One of the real advantages of this is that it makes it possible to do come much closer to full

geographical coverage—playing the heck out of the parts of I know gives me a much better chance of including as much Byzantine as Islamic and Latin-Christian history.

2] Do we need to teach the old narrative and the new one?

In general I think not. On the first day of a Mediterranean history class I do contrast the geographical focus of this course to the geographical focus of the traditional medieval history course, and make an argument for why it's a better focus, especially because it does allow us to study a past that looks much more like our present. But after that I do relatively little in the way of pointing out how a Mediterranean focus makes us think differently, for example, about the Protestant Reformation. While my guess is that a very large number of my students in such a course will have taken AP European history in high school, it's worth remembering that (bizarrely enough indeed) that course does not cover the Middle Ages in any meaningful way, so for the most part I don't think they really know the traditional medieval narrative, and there's so much to teach them about medieval Mediterranean, that I don't want to spend any time rehearsing the England-France-Germany-Northern-Italy+Crusades Middle Ages (which I was first taught in 1982).

3] Presentism and civics lessons:

I think it's possible to balance that past as present and the past as a foreign country in a Mediterranean survey course. Yes, the fact of Jews, Christians, and Muslims living side-by-side and interacting with each in a variety is part of the medieval Mediterranean that is present in a lot of modern Europe and North America (and elsewhere) and it's compelling and useful to play up the similarities between that distant period and our own. But it's also important to play up the dissimilarities. In most Western democracies, despite the efforts of Christian nationalists, Jews,

Christians, and Muslims are at least theoretically equal under the law as citizens of these polities, whereas, they were, of course, not in the pre-modern Mediterranean. We have an obligation to make that fact, and its many implications, just as clear to our students as we do the similarities between now and then.

While I think that a Mediterranean survey is inherently less of an American civics lesson than the old model, I won't hesitate to be a bit corny and say that it is a far better lesson in world citizenship. By breaking down the perception that Christianity and Islam, for example, are and have always been fundamentally and only hostile to each other the Mediterranean survey implicitly and pretty relentlessly argues against the clash of civilizations thesis. This can only be to the good in training responsible citizens of a globalized world.