A conversation with Clifford Backman

OUP: Tell us a little bit about yourself.
Clifford Backman: I’m a history professor at Boston University. I’ve spent my whole career there, teaching Western Civ. I’ve just finished my forty-second consecutive semester. It began as a labor of assignment, but it has now become a labor of love and conviction.

OUP: How has it changed?
Clifford Backman: Western Civ courses were invented in this country in the aftermath of World War I, in an effort to explain how the world had gotten into such a mess. For a long time, it was a traditional blood-and-guts kind of history, and the focus stayed pretty much relentlessly on Western Europe itself.

OUP: That’s more than twenty years teaching Western Civ! You must know a lot about the course. What can you tell us about it?
Clifford Backman: Western Civ courses were seen as being either boring discussions of long-dead, white, European, male kings—or as being a sort of scatter-shot social history with discussion of lots of interesting subjects. So, the challenge now in teaching Western Civ is to bring back that sense of purpose.

OUP: How do you propose to do that?
Clifford Backman: By broadening the expanse of what we discuss. This is not just the story of the great, white, European males, but also those great Jews, Muslims, and Greek Orthodox civilizations. All of these people in a constant interaction and confronting many of the same problems.

OUP: How do you do it differently?
Clifford Backman: I introduce a phrase called the “Greater West.” This is not meant to be a judgment call or a moral assertion. But it’s an insistence upon expanding the focus to treat a larger geographic area. My book keeps a constant inclusion of the Jewish and Islamic worlds in the context of the traditional history of Europe itself.

OUP: What else makes your book special?
Clifford Backman: My book also focuses on what might be called the history of values—that is, on the assumptions that lay behind political and economic developments, behind intellectual and artistic ventures, and behind social trends and counter-trends.

OUP: You decided to include embedded sources in your book. Can you tell us a little bit about your decision to do that?
Clifford Backman: They’re essential. Students need to hear the voices and arguments of the past—if a passage is worth quoting at all, then embed it in the text and talk about it as an intrinsic part of the story.

Consistently engaging and broad in its geographical scope, *Cultures of the West* presents students with the fundamental questions and developments that have shaped the Greater West.