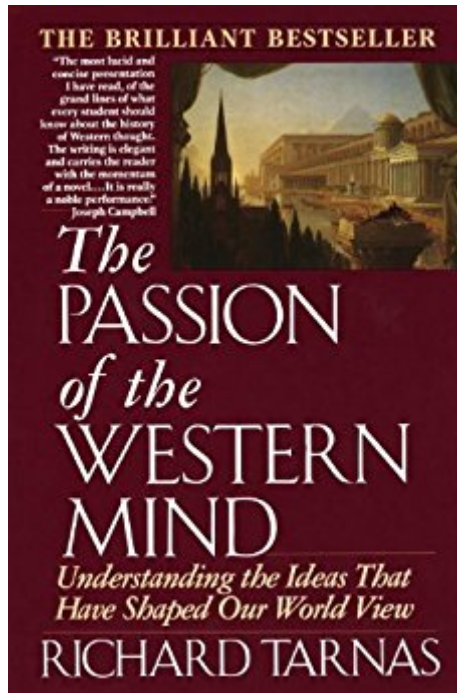


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Passion Of The Western Mind: Understanding The Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View



Synopsis

"The most lucid and concise presentation I have read, of the grand lines of what every student should know about the history of Western thought. The writing is elegant and carries the reader with the momentum of a novel... It is really a noble performance."--Joseph Campbell, author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

Here are the great minds of Western civilization and their pivotal ideas, from Plato to Hegel, from Augustine to Nietzsche, from Copernicus to Freud. Richard Tarnas performs the near-miracle of describing profound philosophical concepts simply but without simplifying them. Ten years in the making and already hailed as a classic, *THE PASSION OF THE WESTERN MIND* is truly a complete liberal education in a single volume.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

The title of the book says it all, and not to be overlooked. This is a book that seeks to ascertain the passion that underpins the development of the western mind. Tarnas does a tremendous job of what is the Herculean task of tracing the roots of that development from the Ancient Greeks, through the birth of Christianity, the middle ages, the enlightenment and the birth of the modern

world. Make no mistake. This is NOT a text defining the means by which modernist science came to be the one and only defining truth of the cosmos. Those with a modern western mindset or scientific predilection might be lulled into this impression in the early chapters. But such an initial misunderstanding, to be fair to Tarnas, would be more due to the bias of the modern mind, rather than a function of the text. For throughout the development of his narrative, Tarnas is painstaking in his description of the interplay of the spiritual, the philosophical, and the empirical/scientific. I noted that a prior viewer fell into this trap, no doubt expecting Tarnas to conclude with a denunciation of the spiritual and philosophical vestiges of prehistory, depositing these schools into the waste bin of History, whilst announcing the triumph of the modernist worldview. Far from it. Tarnas' penultimate analysis examines what he calls "the crisis in modern science" and the emergence of postmodern thought, both of which undermined the roots of certainty. Yet the postmodernist too may be dismayed when Tarnas concludes in his epilogue with a broad sweep of the hand, finally positing an essentially spiritual teleological thrust to the very human development he has traced.

I went to one of England's "best" schools, and a leading university where I studied Social Anthropology. I assumed I was well educated - until I read Rick Tarnas' book, sitting on a beach in India, and realized that I knew virtually nothing about the history of thought in the West. And I realized that without that knowledge, all that I thought I knew was rendered paper-thin. I could not put the book down. It was an incredible experience to trace the history of Europe, the West and thus the modern world, through the lens of philosophical, religious and scientific thinkers and, for the first time ever, feel that I could see the map, grasp the background to my own personal experience, and thereby address the ever more urgent questions arising in me about our world. In addition to the question of at last becoming familiar with the underpinning of the Western way of thinking and acting, I found great pleasure in the way Richard Tarnas uses language. He writes with extraordinary lucidity and elegance. It drew me on, feeding my aesthetic appetite, which I found as important as the content, finally, for this book is an experience. It does what all writers hope for in their writing, but few can really achieve. A few years after that experience, I ended up coming to study in the place where Rick Tarnas teaches, the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. I have found him to be as elegant a speaker and teacher as I found his writing to be. My final thought is that this book should be required reading for ALL students in senior grades of high school, or in the first year of university - whether studying Sciences or Humanities. The way we think is of critical importance for the well-being of the world.

This book starts well. I found the introduction to Greek philosophy rewarding in the way it made clear various strands running through the work of Plato and Aristotle. Later he piqued my interest in medieval scholastic philosophy. His summaries of Galileo, Copernicus and Kepler seem sound. In fact as far as Kant it's hard to find fault with this book. Unfortunately after Kant things become a little different. You see this is not what it purports to be - an introduction to the history of Western thought. It is the history of Western thought from the point of view of a member of a philosophy department in a Western university - and not just any philosophy department - a *Continental* philosophy department. To read this book you'd think that much of the intellectual life of the twentieth century had simply never happened. Tarnas chooses to completely ignore almost all Anglo-American empiricist philosophy in the last 100 years and clearly has little or no knowledge of scientific developments. Almost his only mention of twentieth century scientists, besides the obvious Einstein, is a list of scientists who have prominence purely because of popular science literature - and even here Tarnas is unable to distinguish between genius and merely crackpot. The book has a chapter called the 'Crisis in Science'. Besides the obvious and well known moral issues surrounding science this chapter bears no relation to anything that I experienced as someone who grew up within the scientific tradition. In fact I am at a complete loss to know what his crisis is - unless it be the general problem that academic work (in all fields) is now so specialised that philosophers, who like to make their field *everything*, can no longer hope to understand what takes place outside their field.

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