

## THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF MULTICULTURALISM by E. Calvin Beisner

The multiculturalist movement has swept college and university campuses around the United States during recent years. Rooted in egalitarian democracy, the civil rights movement, and affirmative action personnel and admissions policies, it offers a new vision for education—and with it, new visions of history, science, economics, and all other academic disciplines. Those concerned about the quality of American higher education need to understand the movement and respond appropriately.

### Varieties of Multiculturalism

Let us begin with some defining. In this context, when we speak of *culture*, we mean the concepts, habits, skills, art, instruments, institutions, etc., of a given people in a given period. Very nearly we equate the word with *civilization*, though I think we have in mind things more particular, on a more humane scale, when we speak of culture.

It is no accident, as T. S. Eliot pointed out in 1946 in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, that the words *culture* and *cultivate* share the same root, *cultus*, and that this Latin word derived from a verb, *colere*, that meant both to worship and to till the soil. “In the beginning,” writes Russell Kirk, following Eliot’s lead, “culture arises from the cult: that is, people are joined together in worship, and out of their religious association grows the organized human community. Common cultivation of crops, common defense, common laws, cooperation in much else—these are the rudiments of a people’s culture. If that culture succeeds,” he adds, “it may grow into a civilization.”<sup>1</sup> At the very core of culture is religion, with its concepts of God and of transcendent morals, concepts so powerful that they shape every other element of culture, for good or ill.

It is clear what we mean by prefixing *multi-* to *culture* to make *multiculturalism*. The prefix reminds us that we have more than one culture in mind—indeed, many cultures.

What is not immediately clear in contemporary use of the word *multiculturalism* is what we mean by the suffix *-ism*. The suffix may, according to the dictionary, denote a variety of things. It may denote (a) the act, practice, or result of something—e.g., terrorism is the act or practice of terror; clearly this is not what we have in mind by the word *multiculturalism*. The suffix may denote (b) the condition of something’s or someone’s existence—e.g., barbarism is the condition of barbarity or a barbarian. Although there might be some of this idea in the use of *multiculturalism* (which, by the way, is too recent a word to be included in the 1987 edition of Webster’s *Collegiate* dictionary)—some writers do use it simply to point to the fact that the American scene is multicultural, i.e., characterized by many cultures—this also is not the primary idea in mind in writings about multiculturalism. The suffix may also denote (c) action, conduct, or qualities characteristic of something—e.g., patriotism is the conduct or quality of a patriot. This begins to come closer to what multiculturalists—and critics of multiculturalism—have in mind. *Multiculturalism* in part denotes conduct befitting, or at least allegedly befitting, a multicultural society. But the primary sense in which writers on multiculturalism seem to use the word is (d) a doctrine, theory, or principle of something—e.g., atomism, in political philosophy anyway, is a theory that denies social cohesion and community and sees people instead as unconnected atoms.

To speak of multiculturalism, particularly in academic circles, is to speak of a doctrine or dogma—a set of beliefs—about our society and how we ought to educate its people. If all we mean by *multiculturalism* is that we recognize and want to teach truths about the many cultures of humanity, certainly there can be no harm in that. Indeed, that is what a good liberal arts education has done for generations. It is what used to be done tolerably well in secondary school

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<sup>1</sup>Russell Kirk, *America’s British Culture* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 1.

courses on geography, history, civics, and cultural anthropology, back in the days when my parents went to school. And indeed I have a strong, intuitive sense that the urge toward a different kind of multiculturalism today is rooted partly in an educational vacuum left behind by the excision of most of the substance of such courses during the pedagogical upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, when such courses tended to be replaced by an ill-defined “social studies.”

### **A Movement Spawnd by Poor Education?**

My intuition, to enlarge on it a little, is this: That many Americans schooled chiefly in the 1960s and later learned little about the cultures of the world through our schooling. We also learned little about the American culture, since American geography, history, civics, and cultural anthropology were generally no better taught than foreign—a fact documented, for example, in E. D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy*. What we did learn of American culture came chiefly by our experience of American contemporary popular culture: radio, television, and the consumer world of the malls. Quite understandably, we didn’t like much of this “American culture.” So it was not surprising when, upon tasting other cultures, many of us uncritically embraced them as alternatives to what we knew of our own. We knew too little of either American or foreign cultures to judge either maturely; we could neither appreciate the really noble aspects of any culture, nor despise the really ignoble aspects.

That, anyway, is my intuition, and it is rooted, as I have hinted, partly in my own experience, an experience not directly of the same sort but of a similar and, I think, related sort. Twelve years ago, having stumbled across it in a bookstore, I read a book on the history of conservative cultural and political thought in England and America from the late eighteenth through the mid twentieth centuries—Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Eliot*. The book fascinated me, as it does today, in my third reading of it. But it also angered me. Why? Because as I read, I realized that although I had heard of almost all of the thinkers with whom those featured in the book jostled, and knew a fair amount about what a handful of them had believed and taught, I had heard of almost none of the writers on whom Kirk focused, and I had known nothing of the beliefs of any of them. Now, I am willing to take my share of responsibility for my ignorance. But I think it is just for me to protest that some of that ignorance was the fruit of an educational system hopelessly biased toward the Left. I was, after all, just two years out of college at the time. All my study of British and American history until that time had been in courses in junior high, high school, and college. I had been schooled in public schools in New York and California and in a large private/public university in Southern California. The only explanation for my having heard of the thinkers of the Left but not of others was that the courses I had taken, throughout ten years of schooling, had consistently featured the one group but not the other. At any rate, upon reading Kirk’s book a new hunger awakened in me that drove me to learn more about such thinking.

A similar phenomenon, I think, has driven some of the multiculturalist urge. People ill schooled—or perhaps better, hardly schooled at all—in geography, history, civics, and cultural anthropology, but acquainted with the worst of their own culture, got selective tastes of other cultures through direct personal contact, or through books or other media, and those tastes awakened a hunger they hadn’t known was there.

I did a little anecdotal research to test this intuition while writing this paper. I asked my mother—who was visiting us at the time—whether she thought the multiculturalist urge might be so rooted. I asked her to reflect on her own schooling and to compare it with mine. She agreed. (Such agreement makes one glad to honor his parents!) She pointed out that when she and my father were growing up, such studies acquainted them with many cultures all around the world—an acquaintance that both served them well and grew when, in the 1950s, they were sent by the U.S. Department of State to work in the diplomatic corps in Calcutta, India.

Imagine the comfort it brought me when I found my intuitions about this confirmed not only by my mother but also in some of my dear mentor's own writing! In one of his most recent books, *America's British Culture*, Dr. Kirk writes:

Six decades ago, when this present writer was enrolled in a public grade school not far from great railway yards outside Detroit, nobody thought of demanding multiculturalism: we already possessed that in our school. In geography class, we learned a great deal about the cultures of five continents; we were very interested. Many of us, a few years later, enrolled (during high school) in three years of history: ancient, modern, and American. At least half of us took two years of language, either Latin or French, with corresponding instruction about Roman civilization or French culture; some pupils finished four years of foreign language. Our intelligent courses in English and American literature helped to redeem us from what T. S. Eliot called "the provincialism of time." We were much aware of diversity in the world and in our own country.

Today the radical multiculturalists complain, or rather shout, that African, Asian, and Latin American cultures have been shamefully neglected in North America's schools. In that they are correct enough. In many primary, intermediate, and high schools nowadays—aye, in colleges, too—the offering in the discipline of history amounts only to a whirlwind "Survey of World History" (with Good Guys and Bad Guys occasionally pointed out by the teacher, amidst the violent dust storm), and perhaps a year of American history, often ideologically distorted. As for geography, that virtually has gone by the board; at least one famous state university, a few years ago, swept away altogether its department of geography. . . .

Sixty years ago, most school pupils were taught a good deal about the people and the past of Bolivia, Morocco, China, India, Egypt, Guatemala, and other lands. They even learnt about Eskimo and Aleut cultures. Nowadays pupils are instructed in the disciplines of home economics, driver education, sex education, and the sterile abstractions of Social Stu. Formerly all pupils studied for several years the principal British and American poets, essayists, novelists, and dramatists—this with the purpose of developing their moral imagination. Nowadays they are assigned the prose of "relevance" and "current awareness" at most schools.<sup>2</sup>

In short, our lack of understanding of Western culture leaves us susceptible to the twin errors of idolizing and demonizing it, and our lack of understanding of other cultures leaves us susceptible to the same errors regarding them. For our parents, it was no shock to discover things both laudable and condemnable about their own and other cultures. (Some who have heard me say this have responded that their parents could think of nothing in America to criticize because their education had not equipped them for critical thinking. I doubt that. I think it more likely that their parents could and did criticize—but lacking the utopian mindset of my generation [perhaps, indeed, because they *were* more knowledgeable of a wide variety of cultures past and present], they understood that one may accept as tolerable a culture that falls far short of perfection.) For the children of the sixties, seventies, and eighties, most of whom never seriously studied geography or the history of Western or any other civilization, a narrow acquaintance with our own contemporary culture—dominated by thirty or more hours per week of television viewing, by an intolerable substitute for education in our schools, by the entertainment of mindlessness and protest, and by the high cult of the suburban shopping mall—a chance encounter with an astonishing element of a foreign culture can engender a sudden and uncritical enchantment with

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<sup>2</sup>Kirk, *America's British Culture*, 87-8.

things foreign.

### **Varieties of Multiculturalism in the Academy**

But let me come back, now, to the question of what the word *multiculturalism* denotes in common usage. Leaving aside the unobjectionable desire to restore a well-rounded education about the geography, history, civics, and cultures of many lands and peoples—and this simply does not appear to be what is meant by the common usage of the term in either popular or scholarly literature—I want to distinguish three kinds of multiculturalism.

#### *Ethnic Inclusiveness and Self-Esteem*

The first, although objectionable, is rather mild, at least in its initial demands. In an article titled “In Defense of Multiculturalism,” Nathan Glazer points out that “as currently used, the word ‘multiculturalism’ is something of a misnomer. It suggests a general desire or need for students to have something in the curriculum that relates to their own ethnic traits, if these exist, or to those of their parents or ancestors. I don’t think this desire is particularly widespread among many ethnic groups,” he continues. “‘We are all immigrants’ is nice rhetoric, but in fact we are not all immigrants. Some of us came in the last decade, some of our parents came long before that, many millions of us have only the haziest idea of how many ancestors came from where. Since 1980 the census has included a new question, ‘What is your ancestry?’ The great majority of respondents report two, three, or more ancestries. Tens of millions simply insist on being ‘American,’ and nothing else.”<sup>3</sup> (The common notion that immigration into America is greater today than in the past is false. If immigration trends were the chief cause of the rise of multiculturalism, it should have arisen seventy years ago, when immigration was at its highest rate in American history.)

Glazer points out that this desire for an ethnically inclusive curriculum seems neither to have arisen from the increased immigration of recent years nor to be shared by the Asian and Hispanic persons who constitute most immigrants.

But if it is not the new immigration that is driving the multicultural demands, what is it? Multiculturalism in its present form derives basically from black educators. It is one of the longest settled elements in the American population that makes the sharpest case for multiculturalism. Asians, who make up half of current immigrants, are not much concerned. Nor are Spanish-speaking immigrants from Central and South America. Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans do tend to support bilingual education and the maintenance of the Spanish language. But they are definitely junior partners in the fight for multiculturalism.

I’m convinced that were it not for the pattern of poor achievement among blacks in the schools, the multicultural movement would lose much of its force. . . . Multiculturalism, and one of its variants, Afrocentrism, is presented to us by black educators and leaders as one of the means whereby this deficiency may be overcome.<sup>4</sup>

The claim of what I am calling the milder form of multiculturalism is that by acquainting students with the cultures of their ethnic heritage, educators can help to build the students’ self-esteem. Better self-esteem, in turn, will enable the students to achieve more in schooling.<sup>5</sup> But

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<sup>3</sup>Nathan Glazer, “In Defense of Multiculturalism,” *The New Republic* 205:10 (September 2, 1991), 18-21.

<sup>4</sup>Glazer, “In Defense of Multiculturalism,” 18-21.

<sup>5</sup>Ralph A. Smith, “The Question of Multiculturalism,” *Arts Education Policy Review* 94:4 (March/April 1993), 2-19.

there are three major problems with the claim. First, it fails to ask, let alone to answer, the question, “If these students’ learning skills are so crippled by low self-esteem that they need their self-esteem raised to enable them to learn more, how are they supposed to learn about their ethnic heritage in order to raise their self-esteem?” It seems the disease must be cured before the medicine can be taken successfully—in which case, what good is the medicine? Second, as Lynn Cheney put it, “Education is about the pursuit of truth, and one of the characteristics of multiculturalism gone wrong is that it turns education into something else—a procedure for making people feel good, for example; a way of building self-esteem. . . . Turning education into therapy invites distortion and half-truth into the curriculum. Education is not primarily about self-esteem. It is about learning to seek evidence, to evaluate information, to weigh conflicting opinions.”<sup>6</sup> Third, there simply is no evidence linking high self-esteem to high academic achievement, or low self-esteem to low academic achievement. In fact, as Diane Ravitch pointed out in an exchange of articles with multiculturalist Molefi Kete Asante, “In the most recent international assessment of mathematics, Korean children had the highest achievement and American children had the lowest achievement. When the students were asked whether they were good in mathematics, the Koreans had the lowest score, and the Americans had the highest score. In other words, the Americans had the highest self-esteem and the lowest achievement; the Koreans had the lowest self-esteem and the highest achievement.”<sup>7</sup> What seems to correlate best with academic achievement is lots of hard academic work, and in at least some cases low self-esteem seems to promote rather than to suppress hard work.

The self-esteem argument for multiculturalism, however, can only succeed if it is assumed that what students will learn about their own ethnic heritage is laudable. Granting, for the sake of argument, that there is any connection between awareness of ethnic heritage and self-esteem, it must be admitted that discovering that one’s ancestors were in charge of Jewish concentration camps in Hitler’s Germany, or had sold their black brothers and sisters into slavery in West Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or had been among the bloodthirsty followers of Babeuf in the French Revolution, would not be likely to promote self-esteem—or at least it *shouldn’t*. No, in order for the self-esteem version of multiculturalism to work, students must learn that their ethnic heritage is good—overwhelmingly good. And this in turn leads to the tendency among many multiculturalists to highlight whatever good they can find in cultures, to overlook bad traits, and even to fabricate history if necessary to create a better impression than real history seems to suggest. Such is the case, for instance, with much of what is called Afrocentric history, which often conveniently omits any mention of the fact that black African slave captors were the first link in the African slave trade, claims that all the best in human history has come from Africa, that Greek culture was largely derived from Egyptian, and that Egyptian culture was black—a highly dubious claim historically—and some of whose proponents claim the superiority of people whose skin is darkened by melanin.<sup>8</sup> Such also is the case with some modern historians who persist in portraying American Indian tribes almost universally as peaceful, gentle, and living in harmony with nature, despite widespread and sometimes massive

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<sup>6</sup>Lynn V. Cheney, “Taking Steps to Build Support for Change,” *Change* 25:1 (January/February 1993), 8-11.

<sup>7</sup>Molefi Kete Asante and Diane Ravitch, “Multiculturalism: An Exchange,” *American Scholar* 60:2 (Spring 1991), 267-76.

<sup>8</sup>The black Egypt claim is defended most strongly in Cornell professor Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, volume 1, *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989). Withering critiques of Bernal’s scholarship and thesis are to be found in Gleaves Whitney, “Is the American Academy Racist?” *University Bookman* 30:2 (1990), 4-15 (a review of the book) and Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1992), chapter 4, “In Search of Black Pharaohs.” The melanin claim is mentioned by Diane Ravitch in “Multiculturalism: An Exchange,” with Molefi Kete Asante, in *American Scholar* 60:2 (Spring 1991), 267-76.

human sacrifice, intertribal warfare, and the use by some Plains Indian tribes of prairie fires to drive large herds of buffalo over cliffs to their deaths, where the Indians then removed tongues, hearts, and other delicacies and left the carcasses to decay.<sup>9</sup> Such, too, is the case with those right-wing American historians who gloss over the injustices done to American Indians by white pioneers and the American government; with those Japanese historians who carefully downplay the role of military imperialism in Japan leading up to World War II; and so on. Thus may a commitment to multiculturalism even of the mild variety prostitute the discipline of history to the cause of self-esteem and ideology.

### *Racial and Ethnic Limits to Thought?*

The second way in which *multiculturalism* is used implies that race and ethnicity have an unavoidable effect on how people think and on the values they embrace, or even are capable of embracing. We cannot expect black students to learn well in curriculum shaped chiefly by Western culture because that culture doesn't fit the black mind. This form of multiculturalism Diane Ravitch, in her article "*E Pluribus Plures*," calls "cultural particularism."<sup>10</sup> The racial and ethnic determinism asserted in cultural particularism works in two directions: it imprisons people in their ancestral heritages, and it bars them from full participation in the culture in which they find themselves, particularly if it is American. As several critics pointed out, this is simply racism by another name and equally repulsive morally.<sup>11</sup> From a Christian perspective, it runs contrary to the Biblical teaching that all people share equally in every aspect of the image of God.

### *An Attack on Western Civilization*

The third way in which the word *multiculturalism* is used is, I think, most objectionable. In a very insightful article on multicultural education in the arts, University of Illinois professor of cultural and educational policy Ralph A. Smith, who sympathizes with many of the

<sup>9</sup>Aztecs and others practiced human sacrifice. The Carribs and Iroquois, among others, practiced cannibalism, often eating the hearts of victims killed in war to take their courage into themselves. "The Arapahoe Indians of Colorado stampeded buffalo into death-traps with prairie fires, butchered the best animals, leaving the rest to rot, and left a burned-over wasteland unable to sustain life. In the late 17th Century Father Hennepin noted that, in times of plenty, Indians would sometimes kill forty or fifty buffalo, taking only the tongue or the choicest parts. Such waste was not uncommon." In fact, the common notion that the Plains Indians had long lived in symbiotic relationship with the buffalo is false. Before the import of horses by Europeans, the Indians could not effectively hunt buffalo in large numbers. And before unusually warm winters and wet summers in the early 1800s, buffalo herds were generally small and insufficient to provide a livelihood by themselves for the Plains Indians. After those years, however, the herds mushroomed, and many tribes left their ancient semi-nomadic agricultural cultures behind and began to follow the herds exclusively. When their own overhunting, supplemented by that of whites, combined with a return to normal weather to reduce the herds two to three decades later, the tribes had lost the skills, habits, and culture of farming and were ruined economically. These and other matters of American Indian mytho-history are dealt with in a fascinating article by historian Roger Schultz, "Where the Buffalo Roamed," *Contra Mundum* 3 (Spring 1992) 46-51. See also: Richard A. Young, *Healing the Earth: A Theocentric Perspective on Environmental Problems and Their Solutions* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 29-30; Stephen J. Pyne, "Firestick History," *The Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990): 1132-41.

<sup>10</sup>Diane Ravitch, "*E Pluribus Plures*," *American Scholar* 59:3 (Summer 1990), 337-54.

<sup>11</sup>A review in *The New Republic* of Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s *Disuniting America* points out, "A black psychiatrist attributes white racial inferiority to a genetic inability to produce the skin pigments of melanin that account for black racial superiority. Another black psychologist contends that the black mind works in genetically distinctive ways. Some argue that biological and mental differences make blacks 'process information differently' and prove the need for teaching in 'black English.' This explains black learning difficulties under the present system. The solution is to break with white, racist, Eurocentric culture and embrace 'Afrocentricity.'" Leonard Jeffries of the City College of New York offers his people a choice between the cold, materialistic 'ice people' who brought 'domination, destruction, and death' to the world, and the warm, humanistic 'sun people' and their intellectual and physical superiority" (C. Vann Woodward, "Equal But Separate," *The New Republic* 205:3 [July 15, 1991], 41-3).

multiculturalists' concerns, writes,

In a global context, “multiculturalism” in arts education suggests the study of the arts of all civilizations, Western and non-Western. In the national context of the United States, the term usually implies that greater attention should be paid to the cultural expressions of ethnic and minority groups. But if this were all that multiculturalism denoted today, there would be no major issue, for, increasingly, volumes on the history of art are histories of world art and school textbooks are being rewritten to reflect the contributions to American life of groups previously given little or no consideration.

What makes multiculturalism a matter for serious concern is its transformation into an extreme ideology whose purpose is to undermine the significance of Western civilization by claiming that Western traditions, because of their pervasive racism, sexism, and elitism, are the cause of most of our modern problems. An increasing number of writers, for example, now believe that considerations of ethnic origin, class, and gender are more important in making policy decisions for arts education than the historical influence or artistic excellence of works of art.<sup>12</sup>

Smith cites Roger Kimball's observations about the underlying agenda of multiculturalism:

Implicit in the politicizing mandate of multiculturalism is an attack on the idea of a common culture, the idea that, despite our many differences, we hold in common an intellectual, artistic, and moral legacy, descending largely from the Greeks and the Bible, supplemented and modified over the centuries by innumerable contributions from diverse hands and peoples. It is this legacy that has given us our science, our political institutions, and the monuments of artistic and cultural achievement that define us as a civilization. Indeed it is this legacy, in so far as we live up to it, that preserves us from chaos and barbarism. And it is precisely this legacy that the multiculturalist wishes to dispense with. Either he claims that the Western tradition is merely one heritage among many—and therefore that it deserves no special allegiance inside the classroom or out of it—or he denies the achievements of the West altogether.<sup>13</sup>

It appears, from reading both multiculturalists and their critics, that multiculturalists mean not only to disparage Western culture but also to foster a moral relativism that makes meaningful evaluation and critique of culture nearly impossible—except when the target is Western culture. Consider the goal of the New York State Regents in a policy recently adopted for promoting multiculturalism: “Each student will develop the ability to understand, respect, and accept people of different races; sex; cultural heritage; national origin; religion; and political, economic, and social background, and their values, beliefs, and attitudes.” American Federation of Teachers president Albert Shanker puts the common-sense objection to such a goal clearly:

This goal, expressed in a lot of positive words, sounds very broadminded, very reasonable. And up to a point, it expresses what we'd hope for from a multicultural and global education. An educated person is not narrow-minded or provincial. So, of course

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<sup>12</sup>Smith, “The Question of Multiculturalism,” 2-19. One particularly helpful element of Smith's article is the careful attention to the hermeneutical fallacies committed by much multiculturalism in its studies of various cultures, but discussing this would take us far afield of the focus of this paper.

<sup>13</sup>Smith, “The Question of Multiculturalism,” 2-19; citing Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1991), 194.

we don't want students to be prejudiced—to prejudge the correctness or desirability of some idea or action before they know anything about it. We want them to be open to new ideas and ways of doing things.

But do we really want them to “respect and accept” the “values, beliefs, and attitudes” of other people, no matter what they are?

Do we want them to respect and accept the beliefs that led Chinese leaders to massacre dissenting students in Tiananmen Square? And what about the values and beliefs that allowed the Ayatolla Khomeini to pronounce a death sentence on Salman Rushdie and the current leaders in Iran to confirm this sentence? Is it okay to condemn an author to death because he wrote something that offends your religious beliefs?

Is exposing unwanted children to the elements and certain death, a custom still widely practiced in some countries in Asia and Africa, to be respected and accepted because it is part of somebody else's culture? Is female circumcision? Must we respect the custom of forcing young children in the Philippines or Thailand to work in conditions of virtual slavery? And must we look respectfully on Hitler's beliefs and actions?<sup>14</sup>

The multiculturalists, says Shanker, are

also teaching their students not to make moral judgments. If any custom or law of people in any culture is as defensible as any other, what kind of judgment is possible? So, without intending to, they encourage students in prejudice of a different sort: Instead of mindlessly assuming that others' ways of doing things have to be wrong, students will mindlessly assume these ways of doing things have to be right—or at least as good as anyone else's. And by approving practices that would not be tolerated here or in any other democracy, they are saying that some people should be held to lower standards than others—a kind of moral superiority hardly consistent with multicultural and global education.<sup>15</sup>

In sum, multiculturalism tends to magnify whatever seems commendable in all non-Western cultures—especially African culture—and to minimize whatever might seem condemnable. At the same time, it magnifies whatever seems condemnable in Western culture—especially American culture—and minimizes whatever might seem commendable.

## Responding to Multiculturalism

If multiculturalism is unhealthy, as I believe it is, what may we offer in its place? I believe that students well acquainted with the noblest elements of Western culture—especially of Anglo-American culture—and mindful also of its failings, will feel no threat either from criticisms of Western culture or from praise of the good elements of non-Western cultures. In particular, students should be aware of such noble principles of Western culture, not found either so pervasively or in so highly developed forms elsewhere, as the Rule of Law, moral and intellectual and religious liberty, and representative republican (spelled with a lower-case *r*) constitutional government. True, they should also be aware that the West has frequently fallen far short of those great principles, and that it often does so today. But they should recognize that where exceptions

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<sup>14</sup>One could add to Shanker's list such non-Western cultural practices as *suttee*—the Hindu custom of a widow's throwing herself on the cremation fire of her dead husband; treatment of wives as property by Arab Muslims; *jihad*, Muslim holy war, which can include terrorism; and a host of other practices that even most Western multiculturalists would condemn.

<sup>15</sup>Albert Shanker, “The Pitfalls of Multicultural Education,” *Education Digest* 57:4 (December 1991), 5-6.

to these principles in the West are precisely that—exceptions—they have been and continue to be the rule in almost all other cultures.

As Christians, particularly, we should keep in mind that, up until the last century or two, Christianity's influence has always been far more pervasive in Western civilization (and I should remark here that I include in Western civilization the Byzantine civilization, much of which has since become part of Arab civilization) than elsewhere around the world. Western civilization has been more shaped by Christianity—with all its spots and blemishes, along with all its truth, goodness, and beauty—than by any other single influence. For Christians to jump on the multiculturalist bandwagon is for us to become implicitly critical of the influence of Christianity in culture. It is, by implication, for us to deny the legitimacy of the attempt to influence culture toward the true, the good, and the beautiful as these are revealed to us in the Bible.

Let me close, then, by suggesting, ever so briefly and, I am afraid, insufficiently, certain elements of Anglo-American culture that are truly commendable and that students should be taught about. I owe much to Russell Kirk's *America's British Culture* for what follows:

### *Language and Literature*

The English language, "terse and powerful," has given birth to some sublime literature: the works of Milton and Shakespeare, of Spenser and Sidney and Marlowe and Ben Jonson, of Raleigh and Fuller and Samuel Johnson exemplify what we might call high culture, but equally valuable are such things as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and the bold simplicity of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, not to mention the beautiful hymnody of the Wesleyan and Puritan traditions. And the Authorized or "King James" Version of the Bible has yet to be equalled for literary brilliance as a translation of holy Scripture.

### *The Rule of Law*

"England's rather elaborate juridical structure is founded upon what is called 'the Common Law,'" writes Kirk. "(The word *common* here signifies that this body of laws is recognized and enforced throughout all the land, rather than being merely local law or custom; also it signifies that 'the law is no respecter of persons,' all orders and classes, including kings, being subject to its rules—'equality before the law.')

England's common law is the footing for American law as well, and for all major English-speaking countries—with the interesting exception of Scotland, where the legal system for the most part is civil law, Roman in its roots."<sup>16</sup> The principles of trial by jury, due process, and the rule of law, which, in the words of Arthur Hogue, "implies that all agencies of government must act upon established principles; even the highest bodies and officials are not permitted to act upon arbitrary will or caprice. The supremacy of law means that all the acts of government agencies are subject to examination in the courts, which are compelled in their turn to follow established procedures, 'due process', and to reach decisions guided not by whim but by generally accepted principles and sound reason"<sup>17</sup>—these principles are at the heart of American jurisprudence. True, they are not always lived up to; but they do not even exist in most Asian, African, and Latin American countries—and where they do exist, they are chiefly a legacy of colonialism. We owe much to Magna Carta, the Declaration of Right of 1689, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution of the United States.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Kirk, *America's British Culture*, 29.

<sup>17</sup>Kirk, *America's British Culture*, 31; citing Arthur R. Hogue, *Origins of the Common Law* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 188-90.

<sup>18</sup>The meta-legal principle of the Rule of Law is sadly neglected in contemporary studies, whether in law schools or in secondary and undergraduate civics courses. But it is one of the most important principles in all of civilization, and it is firmly rooted in Biblical categories of justice, particularly the requirement of impartiality. For helpful

*Representative Government*

The “Mother of Parliaments” that sits at Westminster, and the Congress of the United States, and the several state legislatures, have served these countries well, giving them a stability unmatched by other countries around the world, protecting the people, not perfectly but tolerably well, from the tyrannies of Right and Left, of monarchy and democracy alike. “The federal system of government devised at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 is America’s principal contribution to modern political institutions. It was original, for nothing much resembling federalism (to use the term in the modern sense) had existed previously in the world.”<sup>19</sup>

*The Habits of the Heart*

Our mores and minds, the habits of the heart, are chiefly of Christian origin, although much colored by British and American history. As Tocqueville put it, “It is their mores, then, that make the Americans of the United States, alone among Americans, capable of maintaining the rule of democracy; and it is mores again that makes the various Anglo-American democracies more or less orderly and prosperous. . . .”<sup>20</sup>

In every culture of the past, everywhere in the world, the principal source of a culture’s mores—its traditional customs, its way of regarding the human condition, its principles of morality—has been religious belief. This has been true even when many people within that culture have ceased to feel any devotion to the old religious creed; even so, habit and custom fix them in a routine of existence, so that men may open doors for ladies even though they have forsworn the traditions of civility; boys may refrain from pilfering because “Dad taught me not to” even though they never attended Sunday school; and women may be most charitable even though they have forgotten the Golden Rule and the injunctions of Saint Paul. Thus a vestigial and peripheral morality may survive the withering of the cult from which a culture arose originally. . . . A congeries of sects [settled the American colonies]. Were they in conformity to the mores of old England? Yes, for all professed their Christian faith, all read King James’s Bible (with the exception of the Catholics, who had the Douay Bible); all preached the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. All spoke and read English, all lived under English law, all abided by many old English prescriptions and usages. Theirs was Christianity in British forms.<sup>21</sup>

America and Britain and their cultural dependencies share a common religious heritage, a common history in large part, a common pattern of law and politics, and a common body of great literature. Yet American citizens and British subjects cannot be wholly confident that their order will endure forever. It is possible to exhaust moral and social capital; a society relying altogether upon its patrimony soon may find itself bankrupt. With civilization, as with the human body, conservation and renewal are

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introductory discussion of the Rule of Law, see Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (South Bend, IN: Gateway Editions, 1972; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 205-7 (and many other locations cited in the index) and *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), Chapter 6, “Planning and the Rule of Law.” More in-depth considerations of the principle are to be found in A. V. Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, [1885] 1982), 107-22 and elsewhere (helpfully contrasted with administrative law, 213-67) and Bruno Leoni, *Freedom and the Law*, 3d ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, [1961] 1991), *passim*.

<sup>19</sup>Kirk, *America’s British Culture*, 62.

<sup>20</sup>Kirk, *America’s British Culture*, 70, citing Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, edited by J. P. Mayer and translated by George Lawrence (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1969), 287, 305-8.

<sup>21</sup>Kirk, *America’s British Culture*, 70-71.

possible only if healthful change and reinvigoration occur from age to age.<sup>22</sup>

Such “healthful change and reinvigoration” must occur in our own age, if we are to avert the complete decay of our culture. And it may occur, through a renewal of Christian faith, restored appreciation for our “legacy of ordered liberty,” the renaissance of humane letters, and the revivifying of active citizenship in this republic, energized by what some writers have called the old Roman virtues, or *Romanitas: labor, pietas, and fatum*—diligent labor in humble, reverent submission to right and proper authority in the pursuit of destiny. As Christians, too, we can embrace such virtues by laboring in humble service to the Kingdom of God.

### **Humility and Tradition**

But what will not revivify our culture from its miserable decadence is an impetuous severing of our future from our past. “We stand upon the shoulders of giants,” said Bernard of Chartres, and thus we see farther than did they. An essential element of our response to multiculturalism is a revived sense of historical appreciation and of gratitude to our ancestors for all the good they have bequeathed to us. Lacking that, we are prone, in a fit of madness, to repudiate that inheritance. If we do, we shall find ourselves dwarfed by them and overwhelmed by the struggles of our times.

“. . . one of the first and most leading principles on which the commonwealth and the laws are consecrated,” wrote Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, warning the English (and Americans) of the dangers inherent in the radical spirit of Jacobinism,

is lest the temporary possessors and life-renters in it, unmindful of what they have received from their ancestors, or of what is due to their posterity, should act as if they were the entire masters; [the commonwealth and the laws are consecrated so] that [the temporary possessors] should not think it amongst their rights to cut off the entail, or commit waste on the inheritance, by destroying at their pleasure the whole original fabric of their society; hazarding to leave to those who come after them, a ruin instead of an habitation—and teaching these successors as little to respect their contrivances, as they had themselves respected the institutions of their forefathers. By this unprincipled facility of changing the state as often, and as much, and in as many ways as there are floating fancies or fashions, the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth would be broken. No one generation could link with the other. Men would become little better than the flies of a summer.

And first of all the science of jurisprudence, the pride of the human intellect, which, with all its defects, redundancies, and errors, is the collected reason of ages, combining the principles of original justice with the infinite variety of human concerns, [if treated] as a heap of old exploded errors, would be no longer studied. . . . Barbarism with regard to science and literature, unskilfulness with regard to arts and manufactures, would infallibly succeed to the want of a steady education and settled principle; and thus the commonwealth itself would, in a few generations, crumble away, be disconnected into the dust and powder of individuality, and at length dispersed to all the winds of heaven.

To avoid therefore the evils of inconstancy and versatility, ten thousand times worse than those of obstinacy and the blindest prejudice, we have consecrated the state, that no man should approach to look into its defects or corruptions but with due caution; that he should never dream of beginning its reformation by its subversion; that he should approach to the faults of the state as to the wounds of a father, with pious awe and trembling solicitude. By this wise prejudice we are taught to look with horror on those

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<sup>22</sup>Kirk, *America's British Culture*, 83.

children of their country who are prompt rashly to hack that aged parent in pieces, and put him into the kettle of magicians, in hopes that by their poisonous weeds, and wild incantations, they may regenerate the paternal constitution, and renovate their father's life.

Then, in a flight of rhetorical genius, Burke proceeded to oppose to the nominalist contract theory of society derived from Locke and Rousseau an understanding of society worthy of the finest covenantal theology:

Society is indeed a contract. Subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest may be dissolved at pleasure—but the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, callico or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties. It is to be looked on with other reverence; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primaevial contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place. This law is not subject to the will of those, who by an obligation above them, and infinitely superior, are bound to submit their will to that law. The municipal corporations of that universal kingdom are not morally at liberty at their pleasure, and on their speculations of a contingent improvement, wholly to separate and tear asunder the bands of their subordinate community, and to dissolve it into an unsocial, uncivil, unconnected chaos of elementary principles. It is the first and supreme necessity only, a necessity that is not chosen but chooses, a necessity paramount to deliberation, that admits no discussion, and demands no evidence, which alone can justify a resort to anarchy. This necessity is no exception to the rule; because this necessity itself is a part too of that moral and physical disposition of things to which man must be obedient by consent or force; but if that which is only submission to necessity should be made the object of choice, the law is broken, nature is disobeyed, and the rebellious are outlawed, cast forth, and exiled, from this world of reason, and order, and peace, and virtue, and fruitful penitence, into the antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion, and unavailing sorrow.<sup>23</sup>

To avoid descent into that antagonist world, to render proper gratitude to the generations that have gone before and due endowment to the generations that will follow, we must respond to multiculturalism with the recognition of what is good in American culture. We must also recognize in multiculturalism a two-edged sword, an enemy of both liberalism and conservatism—of liberalism because, failing to recognize the capacity of the human mind to transcend racial and ethnic roots in the pursuit of the true, the good, and the beautiful, it wages war against intellectual freedom; of conservatism because, failing to distinguish the true, the good, and the beautiful in Western culture from what is false, evil, and ugly, it hastily determines

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<sup>23</sup>Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, edited by Conor Cruise O'Brien (New York: Penguin, [1790] 1969), 192-5.

to cast all alike aside, thus undermining the foundations of both liberty and order.

### **Bibliographical Note**

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