

# National Humanities Bulletin

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## President's Comment

Joseph Baldacchino



### From the Many, One—or Chaos

The motto of the United States is *E Pluribus Unum*—"From the Many, One." It is an appropriate description for several reasons. In the beginning there was the anomaly of one nation, with a single federal government, comprising not merely a multiplicity of individuals but also a multiplicity of states, each sovereign in its own sphere. The experiment worked—at least for a time. Reason: it possessed an ordering principle in the Constitution, which explicitly enumerated the powers of the central government and specified that those "not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited to it by the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people."

The motto *E Pluribus Unum* is also peculiarly apt in that, perhaps more so than any modern jurisdiction, the United States is a nation of immigrants, and yet—at least for a time—that fact did not prevent its essential unity. For, though the United States has been populated by successive waves of new arrivals from far points on the globe, its social and political institutions and conceptions of right and of rights are predominantly British in origin, its government having evolved from those of the 13 colonies. And, overwhelmingly, the men and women who have come from whatever far place to these shores, having been drawn by the promises inherent in America's inherited culture, have eagerly embraced it as their own, even while leavening it at the edges with cultural particularities from their diverse homelands. In many instances assimilation was made easier, as Russell Kirk has convincingly demonstrated, because the British institutions at the root of American culture had roots in turn in the ancient civilizations of Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem—civilizations that have influenced the cultures not only of most European nations but significant parts of Asia and Africa as well.

Yet increasingly there are influential political and intellectual forces in our society who would stamp out all vestiges of American unity and historical continuity. Under the banner of "multiculturalism," and of offshoots such as "Afrocentrism," these forces—who

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## NHI Notes . . .

NHI Chairman **Claes G. Ryn** has a chapter, "Virtue: Real and Imagined," in *The Unbought Grace of Life: Essays in Honor of Russell Kirk*, edited by James E. Person, Jr. (Sherwood Sugden & Co., 315 5th Street, Peru, Ill. 61354). Contributions to the same volume by NHI Academic Board members: **Forrest McDonald**, "Russell Kirk: The American Cicero"; **Robert Nisbet**, "Lamennais and Tocqueville"; **Paul Gottfried**, "Historical Consciousness in Antiquity"; and **Peter J. Stanlis**, "Russell Kirk: Memoirs of a Friendship." . . . Ryn gave a lecture on "Irving Babbitt's Ethical and Aesthetical Philosophy and the American Political Tradition" at Georgetown University. He spoke at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C., on "Conservative Disdain for Culture." . . . Ryn's article "A Question of Class" in the February 7 issue of *National Review* connects declining social life with the rise of unworthy "elites." The article drew much attention, including interviews on the nationally syndicated Jim Bohannon and G. Gordon Liddy radio shows.

## NHI Needs Your Help!

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## NHI Loses Russell Kirk, President Nixon

"April is the cruellest month," T. S. Eliot wrote. That certainly was true for the National Humanities Institute, as Dr. Russell Kirk and President Richard Nixon, two prominent Americans who served NHI in major capacities for many years, died in April within a period of scarcely a week.

Dr. Kirk, a co-founder of the Institute who died April 29 surrounded by his wife and daughters at his ancestral home in Mecosta, Michigan, was one of the most influential writers of his time. In some 30



Kirk

books—including *The Conservative Mind*, *The Roots of American Order*, *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, and *Eliot and His Age*—and in countless articles and lectures dealing with intellectual history, education, literature, and politics, Kirk taught Americans a broader, more historical understanding of their society. Conservatives, he argued, did not have to go across the Atlantic to find authentic roots. To those on the right who advocated radical and economic individualism, he pointed out that genuine conservatism recognizes freedom's dependence on community, tradition, and faith.

Kirk argued for the primacy of ethics

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dominate the humanities and social-science faculties of the nation's elite universities as well as the public-school curricula in many states—insist that there is not one American culture but many. Similarly, they teach that there is no such thing as American history but women's history, African-American history, Hispanic or Latino history, "gay" history, and so forth.

The practitioners of multi-speak do not contend merely that there are subcultures

and countercultures whose views and ways of life diverge from that of the dominant culture. There has always been room within the nooks and crannies of a free society for subcultures to practice their divergent ways and to contend for—though not necessarily to win—gradual acceptance from the cultural mainstream. It is one thing to specialize in the study of these societal groups and to chronicle their particular actions and concerns. But the multiculturalists do not stop there. Rather, they maintain that there is no commonality between society at large and

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and culture. A recurring theme in his writings is the need for the moral imagination, nourished by great works of literature. Here Kirk was highly influenced by Irving Babbitt, who also inspired and shaped his interest in Edmund Burke. Throughout his life Kirk warned of abstract ideology, whether of the right or the left. Sound thinking and politics are historically rooted and adjusted to the needs of time and place.

Besides his voluminous writings, Kirk lectured and taught at many of the world's most prestigious universities and institutes of learning. In addition, he edited the influential intellectual quarterly *The University Bookman* and Transaction Books' "Library of Conservative Thought" series, served as president of the Wilbur Foundation (concerned with literature and music), hosted seminars for young scholars sponsored by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, kept up a lively correspondence and, in general, maintained a pace of activity unmatched by half-a-dozen ordinary men.

Yet, despite his incredible work load, Dr. Kirk, along with his wife, Annette, gave unstintingly of his energy to NHI—which he served as director, treasurer, and chairman of the academic board—and helped the Institute in uncountable ways. Simply stated, Russell Kirk is irreplaceable, and his colleagues at the National Humanities Institute will miss him always.

Former President Richard Nixon became honorary chairman of NHI's Board of Trustees in 1989. Though known as a tough-minded politician and statesman, Nixon took an active interest in history, philosophy, and political theory throughout his adult life. In pursuit of those interests, the late President became familiar with the writings of several scholars associated with NHI, including Institute Chairman Claes G. Ryn and Academic Board mem-

ber Paul Gottfried.

Saying in a March 28, 1989, letter, for example, that he had read Ryn's *Democracy and the Ethical Life* and his chapter in *Educating for Virtue*, and that he was preparing to read *Will, Imagination and Reason*, Nixon wrote the NHI chairman: "I found your observations extremely interesting in part, I suppose, because I am in agreement with virtually all of your conclusions."

Nixon's agreement with these writings led him to take an active interest in the NHI program and—with his wife, Pat—to become a financial supporter. In accepting NHI's invitation to become honorary chairman, the thirty-seventh President wrote that he was "making an exception" to his "usual policy" of refusing such requests, adding: "I welcome the opportunity to be associated with such a distinguished group."

In the ensuing years, Nixon, both through meetings and correspondence, kept in close contact with NHI scholars and frequently solicited their ideas as he worked on his several important books during that period. Commenting on the Institute's current brochure in a letter to NHI President Joseph Baldacchino, Nixon indicated the direction of his own thinking when he wrote that "it is right on target in emphasizing the need to rely on individual renewal rather than on new government programs as the way to effect positive and lasting change in American culture."

NHI grieves the passing of Richard Milhous Nixon, a President whose exceptional intellectual depth was matched only by the breadth of his personal kindness.



**Nixon**

various subgroups and that the very existence of "diversity"—i.e., contending groups—is sufficient to deny to the mainstream culture any right to make judgments about what qualities are to be encouraged or discouraged by society—in short, any right to set standards. Similarly, the majority of those who teach and write about black history or women's studies do not treat their subject-matter as a branch of a more encompassing discipline in the same way that a professor of literature may focus special attention on English literature. They contend, on the contrary, that the black mind alone is equipped to apprehend black history and the female mind alone to properly comprehend the history of women's experience. As if it were to be argued that only persons of English descent—or should I say *male* persons of English descent—could derive benefit from the study of Shakespeare!

**A**lthough this is unmitigated nonsense, it is not cause for mirth—unless one would get laughs from a clown who was juggling bottles of nitro-glycerin. For make no mistake: That these ideas are being treated seriously in our schools, universities, and dominant information media poses a threat more lethal to the long-term health of American society than would a pack of terrorists brandishing guns.

Yes, there is diversity and change in America; there is diversity and change always and everywhere. History and the particular circumstances with which men and women must contend are in constant flux, varying from moment to moment. But there is also an element of unity in history: namely, the will to right action with which good persons down the ages have worked to make the best of the ever-varying historical circumstances that confronted them in the service of the intrinsically right solution. Without this element of unity and permanence to order the fleeting and idiosyncratic—without the One in the Many, as Irving Babbitt reminds us—human life would be meaningless and human society impossible. Again, *E Pluribus Unum*. The unity in diversity that is ever present in life has its source in the universal structure of human experience, one aspect of which is the presence of a war within human beings between two competing qualities of will. The "lower will" is alternately described by Babbitt as man's "impulsive," "natural," or "ordinary" self. Its goal is self-indulgence for oneself or one's group. The "higher" or "ethical" will is experienced as an "inner check" on merely selfish impulse in favor of a unifying and more deeply satisfying

goal. The higher will, Babbitt explains, "is not itself an expansive emotion but a judgment and a check on expansive emotion." To the extent that man disciplines his impulsive self, including even his ruling passion, in deference to this transcendent purpose, he not only unifies his own personality and achieves lasting happiness (as distinguished from momentary pleasure), but "moves toward a common center with others who have been carrying through a similar task of self-conquest." The individual thus promotes what is simultaneously good for himself and good for all and thereby brings into being such unity—and community—as can exist in this imperfect world. Lack of deference to the higher will leads to disharmony within the personality and society.

Men and women are not atomistic individuals, fully developed at birth and morally self-sustaining. Rather, they are born into and shaped over time by networks of family, church, local and national communities—each with their own history, traditions, rules and laws, literature, art, and defining myths. Together, these overlapping networks with their accompanying ideas comprise a culture. The culture, in turn, is the summing up in concrete experience—the incarnation in history—of innumerable attempts by men and women over the course of centuries to embody the good in particular circumstances. As such, it offers a valuable source of inspiration and social support for new acts of moral creativity in the novel circumstances that confront us daily. Without the support to man's higher disposition that historical cultures provide, men and women would be no higher on the social and moral scale than the beasts—indeed, given our infinitely greater intellectual and imaginative potential for destructiveness, much lower.

Although our American culture has deep roots in British culture, it is not coextensive with the latter because of the divergent history of our two nations over the last two centuries. Whatever their relative merits in some other ways, U.S. culture has at least this advantage over British culture for Americans: U.S. culture developed in response to *our* unique circumstances as a nation, hence it is more directly responsive to our concrete needs. Still, just as individuals do not exist in isolation, neither do cultures; so there is much that American culture can gain from selective appropriations from its foreign counterparts. Because our civilization shares roots with those of Europe and the Mediterranean area, borrowings from those cultures may be applicable more frequently and directly to our social

and ethical needs. But, insofar as they embody the power of ordering restraint that is present to some degree in all human experience, more geographically remote cultures, such as those of sub-Saharan Africa and the Far East, also have much to offer.

That man is a creature torn between contrary inclinations, who achieves happiness by deferring to a higher purpose, is an insight shared by many of the world's great religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, and some branches of Hinduism. Though for Americans this insight is most frequently associated with Jewish and Christian beliefs, the recognition of this fundamental aspect of the human condition also is found in humanistic, rather than religious, philosophies such as Aristotelianism and Confucianism. Traditionally, in fact, the defining purpose of the humanities was to focus on the best that has ever been thought and written, without regard to geographic and sectarian boundaries, and so to promote true peace and true community across ethnic, racial, and sexual lines.

**I**f the "multiculturalists" were what they proclaim themselves to be, they, too, would be endeavoring to discern the universal that transcends (even as it helps to form) particular cultures. The late Swedish philosopher Folke Leander noted in 1937, for example, that "a Mohammedan and a Christian can both regard sexual restraint as an ethical ideal, although the former lives in polygamy and the latter in monogamy; what they both admit is the value of a certain spiritual attitude. They may both believe in the same hierarchy of values, although their concrete ways of life can be shaped very differently on account of the dissimilarities between the social conventions under which they live." Aristotle, in his discussion of "the mean," also describes humankind's recognition of this shared hierarchy of values; and he does it without reliance on theological doctrines. Though common to the great religions, awareness of the hierarchy of values is not dependent upon faith but is accessible to mundane experience. It emerges, Leander explains, from "the intuition of our ability to check and control *every* important group of impulses through volitional effort" in the interest of a well-ordered and happy existence. And, without the exercise of this ordering power in life, no culture, no society, would be possible but only chaos and dispersion.

Yet the "multiculturalists," owing to their preoccupation with the ephemeral and the eccentric, ignore—and, indeed, seek to de-

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stroy—the quality of will that transcends even as it makes possible particular historical cultures. Hence, the “multiculturalists” should with more accuracy be termed *anti*-culturalists. Writing in the *University Bookman* (Vol. 32, No. 2, 1992), John Lyon noted that an official state document entitled “Multicultural Education in Michigan,” which was typical of similar policy statements being adopted across the United States, defines the term culture so broadly—“all the life-ways of a group of people”—as to make the term meaningless. Multicultural education, says the Michigan document, “values diversity and views cultural differences as a positive and vital force in the development of our society.” But its definition of culture is so nebulous, Lyon observes, that any “vicious, eccentric, or weird” cult or sexual orientation can claim positive status as a “culture,” including “‘Skin-Heads,’ racists, sado-masochists, or flat-earthers.” Clearly, “culture,” when defined in terms of diversity but not also the historical element of unity, means anything and everything—and therefore nothing.

Thanks in part to the growing influence of the “multiculturalists” and their ideological allies, what now passes for “the humanities” in America—and feeds off the largess of the nation’s corporate, foundation, and governmental donors—is antithetical to the humanities’ civilizing purpose and, in the truest sense, is inhumane. To assess the impact of the usurpation of the humanities by its opposite, it is only necessary to see the carnage in our streets, the increasingly brutal wars of contending groups for an ever-shrinking (in relative terms) pot of govern-

mental hand-outs, and the eruption of contempt, and even hatred, for authority in direct proportion to the spread of bureaucratic laws and regulations that are destroying the last vestiges of America’s once-vaunted freedom.

Unless the antihumanities are curtailed and the humanities restored very soon—to their rightful place in America’s schools and universities, cultural institutions, and, most importantly, the hearts, minds, and lives of the educated public—American civilization, or what remains of it, is doomed to a short and nasty existence.

Some will say I have overstated the significance of the humanities: that a restoration of the churches will reverse the tide; and that is true in part. But what many do not realize is that the corruption of the humanities has infected organized religion itself, spawning confusion and decadence among both clergy and laity. Witness, for example, the spread of “religious” doctrines, such as “Liberation Theology” and fundamentalist Islam, whose ends are particularistic and expansive, not, as in genuine religion, universalistic and self-questioning. In the corrupt intellectual and artistic climate of our time, many, perhaps most, professing believers cannot distinguish what Babbitt called “sham spirituality” from the genuine article—an incapacity that is deadly. No, the churches cannot go it alone. Especially in this ecumenical age, they need the support of humane studies and genteel habits to nourish the cultural environment in which they can more effectively perform their special mission.

The humanities—with their evocation of unity in diversity—must be restored. The alternative is too dismal to contemplate.

**NHI Needs Your Help!**

For a decade now NHI has waged a difficult and often lonely struggle to revitalize the humanities, and with them the American culture. During that time, we have received generous financial support from numerous individuals, foundations, and corporations. To them we are eternally grateful.

But the resources available are woefully disproportionate to the task we have undertaken. Hence we are understaffed, we have been forced to miss publishing deadlines (the last issue of this BULLETIN did not appear), and much crucial work has gone undone year after year.

Though many supporters have been generous, others who have received our publications for years—and shown their interest by sending change-of-address forms—have never made a donation or have not done so recently. As a result *NHI faces a potential crisis*. We are in danger of falling below the broad base of support that the Internal Revenue Service says we must have in order to be classified a “public foundation.” Should we lose that status, we may be forced to close.

If you agree that American society is doomed unless the humanities are revitalized (see “President’s Comment,” in this issue), please help NHI to whatever extent you can as soon as possible.

Contributions are tax-deductible. Donors of at least \$35 will receive free subscriptions to *Humanitas* and the NATIONAL HUMANITIES BULLETIN.

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