

# NATIONAL HUMANITIES BULLETIN

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## President's Comment

Joseph Baldacchino



### Humanities Being Destroyed from Within

For most of this century the humanities were slighted as American education became enthralled to the notion that the way to happiness, peace, and the good life generally lay in the natural sciences and technology. The humanities—including history, literature, and the arts—were frequently seen as secondary matters to be indulged only after the more “practical” and “important” subjects had received ample attention.

As faith in the salvific powers of technology has foundered upon the hard reality of unreconstructed and flawed human nature, the humanities have begun to emerge by slow degrees from long eclipse. But now humane studies are being sorely pressed from a new quarter, this time from within.

The current threat comes from educators at all levels—and they are legion—who would deprive the humanities of their life-giving spirit and divide the carcass among a host of competing fiefdoms—feminists, Marxists, homosexuals, and those who, under such banners as “multiculturalism” and “Afrocentrism,” would turn the curriculum into an instrument of racial, ethnic, and gender-based warfare.

New York State, for instance, is implementing a “multicultural” curriculum, which will be imposed on every public school throughout the state in grades kindergarten through high school. The avowed purpose is to eliminate “Eurocentrism” from the curriculum and to give equal time and prominence to the “contributions” of “African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Puerto Ricans/Latinos, and Native Americans.”

Although it is possible that the contributions of these groups have been inadequately appreciated in the past, it must be recognized that Europeans, predominantly white male Protestants from Great Britain, were by far the most prominent participants in the establishment and early development of the United States and that the core institutions of American life have

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### Forrest McDonald Receives Weaver Award

Forrest McDonald, Distinguished Research Professor of History at the University of Alabama and a Charter Member of the National Humanities Institute's Academic Board, has won the 1990 Richard M. Weaver Award for Scholarly Writing, which is conferred annually by The Ingersoll Foundation.

Professor McDonald, who is widely recognized as one of the most influential historians in the United States, has been called the leading scholar of the American Constitution. He was honored for his seminal contributions to the study of the formative years of the American republic.

McDonald established his importance in American historiography with *We the*

### NHI Notes . . .

Two recent additions to the NHI Board of Trustees are **William M. Benton**, chairman of the Fort Lauderdale-based Verimed Corporation, and **Dwight L. Chapin**, a Weston, Conn., publisher who served in the Nixon White House. . . . NHI Chairman **Claes G. Ryn** has been speaking from coast to coast. Among his lecture audiences was the Arts and Humanities program at Dominican College in San Rafael, Calif. . . . Dr. Ryn has been selected by the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy to nominate authors for the Nobel Prize in Literature. . . . NHI President **Joseph Baldacchino** participated in a conference on the state of American conservatism that was held on Maryland's Eastern Shore. . . . Former President **Richard Nixon's** recommended books for holiday gift giving in the December issue of *The American Spectator* included two works by NHI authors: *Prospects for Conservatives* by NHI Treasurer and Academic Board Chairman **Russell Kirk** and *Democracy and the Ethical Life* by NHI Chairman Claes G. Ryn. The latter book recently appeared in a new expanded edition from The Catholic University of America Press.

*People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* (1958), which discredited the then-dominant view made popular by Charles Beard that the Constitution was contrived mainly to advance the Framers' economic self-interest.



Other significant books by Professor McDonald include *E Pluribus Unum: The Formation of the American Republic, 1776-1790* (1965) and *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution* (1985).

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### Humanities Threatened

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their roots in European Christendom and Graeco-Roman culture.

The advocates of multiculturalism are not impressed by this. They demand that the assertions of self-appointed spokesmen for each of the officially recognized minority groups be given the same attention in American schools as the canon of great works and significant events that constitutes our mainstream cultural heritage. On this scheme, the Western heritage is pushed from the center of the curriculum to the periphery, where it is fortunate to get one-fifth of the students' attention.

What's more, the multicultural curriculum tends to present favored minority groups as the source of every virtue, while European civilization is damned wholesale as exploitative and oppressive.

A thousand teachers and educational policy-makers who are intent on imposing an "Afrocentric" curriculum recently held a four-day conference in Atlanta. Leonard Jeffries, chairman of the Department of Black Studies at the City College of New York and a leading consultant to the task force that is reconstructing the New York State curriculum, told the Atlanta gathering that the "ice people" - his derogatory term for Europeans - brought the world "domination, destruction, and death."

Also working on the New York curriculum is Professor Ali A. Mazrui of the State University of New York at Binghamton, who makes no bones about his hatred for the entire Western tradi-

tion. "The decline of Western civilization might well be at hand," writes Mazrui. "It is in the interest of humanity that such a decline should take place."

Though lacking in academic credibility, the doctrines of "multiculturalism" are being injected for political reasons into public-school curricula in major cities across the country, including Atlanta, Baltimore, Indianapolis, Portland, and Washington, D.C. Proponents argue that such teachings will bolster the pride of minority students and encourage them to learn.

Yet, far from helping its intended beneficiaries, such special-interest boosterism can only bring long-term destruction and despair. By systematically encouraging arbitrary self-assertiveness on the part of various groups, the armed doctrines now contending for dominance of the curriculum are setting the stage for unending social and political conflict.

Not only do the claims of these academic pressure groups have little basis in reality, but they tend to separate those who come under their sway from the riches of a humane heritage that heretofore has served to harmonize diverse groups and individuals.

The great benefit of the humanities, rightly understood, is that they unify individuals of both sexes and of myriad ethnic and social backgrounds in appreciation of that which is highest in human nature. Instances from the past of great moral character and virtue, elevating wisdom and insight, and enriching beauty and coherence exemplify that which is the common property of humanity at its best.

Whether drawn from history, tradition, or literature and the arts, such concrete examples of goodness in action provide standards that call people away from mere idiosyncrasy, self-indulgence, and unwarranted self-aggrandizement at the expense of others.

Persons who are inspired by those standards strive to live their lives accordingly. This requires much inner working, but those who make the effort are rewarded by a form of happiness that transcends mere pleasure. And they are drawn into community with others who are similarly motivated.

Of such difficult moral working is civilization built, and without this working - which, as Irving Babbitt observed, is experienced by the acting individual as a *will to refrain* - civilization cannot stand.

Hence the presence or absence of such inner striving and restraint in deference to inherited standards is the central reality of human existence, in comparison to which distinctions of sex, race, or financial status are inconsequential. This is the true lesson of the humanities for those who are open to it - a lesson that is wholly lost on the proponents of multiculturalism, feminism, and other forms of group imperialism.

These last portray their ideological doctrines of unrestraint as the way to liberation for the groups whose interests they claim to represent. But to be denied the common heritage of our humanity is in fact enslavement to that aspect of our nature that throws society into conflict and fragments our very personalities.

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Enclosed is my tax-deductible contribution to help NHI to conduct its program of education, research, and publishing in support of traditional Western values. (Contributors of \$25 or more will receive *Humanitas* and the *National Humanities Bulletin*.)

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