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Western civ at Yale?

On Dean Kagan's plea for Western Civilization.

A light glimmered in the subfusc halls of academia this past September. Under the title “E Pluribus Unum,” Donald Kagan, the eminent classical historian, former director of athletics at Yale, and now Dean of Yale College, addressed the incoming class of 1994, urging them to place Western civilization and culture at the center of their undergraduate studies. He might have thought this an unexceptionable exhortation: What else should students concentrate on at our great liberal-arts institutions? Alas, as has become all too evident over the past few years, the idea that the monuments of Western culture deserve a special place in college curricula has become anathema. This attack on the priority of Western culture has been brewing for some time, fueled in part by accumulated ethnic resentments, in part by the puerile assumption that all cultures are equally valuable. The issue burst into public controversy in 1988 when Stanford University decided to scrap its yearlong required course in Western culture in favor of a cluster of “multicultural” alternatives. Students could now study the writings of the terrorist Frantz Fanon instead of the works of John Locke; they could watch movies about Navaho Indian culture instead of learning about Periclean Athens. The impetus behind this development was infamously summed up by Jesse Jackson when he marched with five hundred students at Stanford chanting “Hey hey, ho ho, Western culture’s got to go.” The multicultural imperatives that surfaced at Stanford and a few other institutions have now become politically correct dogma at colleges and universities across the country. While some students and professors continue to resist the invitation to sell themselves short, academic administrators have typically joined in with the multicultural chorus, crooning loudly about “diversity” and “pluralism” as they set about dismantling their college curricula. Any dissent from the reigning orthodoxy is instantly met with charges of racism and ethnocentrism.

That a college dean at one of our premier universities should have the courage to undertake an unapologetic defense of Western culture in this stultifying atmosphere is as rare as it is heartening, and it is worth taking a moment to reflect on the arguments Dean Kagan advances. At its most extreme, he notes, the academy’s attack on the traditional curriculum becomes a rejection of Western civilization itself—as well as a rejection of the study of Western civilization—“because of its history of slavery, imperialism, racial prejudice, addiction to war, its exclusion of women and

people not of the white race from its rights and privileges." Less radical multiculturalists hold that Western civilization should continue to be studied but that it must assume a more modest place in the curriculum, becoming merely one culture among many, all of which "have equal claim to our attention." Both positions, Kagan contends, "are unsound." On the contrary, he argues that "It is both right and necessary to place Western Civilization and the culture to which it has given rise at the center of our studies, and we fail to do so at the peril of our students, our country, and of the hopes for a democratic, liberal society emerging throughout the world today."

To the objection that Western culture speaks only to those whose ethnic heritage is European, Dean Kagan takes a strong stand against this new form of racialism, insisting that the cultural and political achievements of the West are potentially available to everyone. He quotes the black American writer and civil-rights leader W. E. B. du Bois, who—though deeply critical of American society—nonetheless affirmed the universality of Western culture. "I sit with Shakespeare," wrote du Bois, "and he winces not. Across the color line I walk arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the veil." Unlike our contemporary multiculturalists, for whom "Truth" is a white, Western, patriarchal fiction imposed on the credulous, du Bois would not allow himself or others to be deprived of the wisdom offered by the West because of what Dean Kagan rightly called "the accident of race."

Furthermore, Dean Kagan argues, the assault on the Western tradition as a tyrannical bastion of racism and sexism "distorts history." To be sure, there are grisly episodes aplenty in the history of the West, but these are common "to almost all the civilizations known ... in human history." Most of the "sins and errors of Western Civilization are those of the human race. Its special achievements and values, however, are gifts to all humanity...." Indeed, what is important about the Western heritage in this context is not what it has in common with other cultures—a common legacy of oppression, inequity, war, and suffering—but the innovations that set it apart. More than any other culture, as Dean Kagan observes, the West "has asserted the claims of the individual against those of the state, limiting its power and creating a realm of privacy into which it cannot penetrate." Moreover, at the center of the Western spirit is a habit of self-criticism as well as "a tolerance and respect for diversity unknown in most cultures." How odd that so many American students and faculty should have chosen this moment, when Western institutions and ideas are triumphing the world over, to declare Western culture "irrelevant, unnecessary, and even vicious."

Dean Kagan applauds the growing diversity of the faculty and student bodies in our colleges and universities. What he opposes is the concomitant growing spirit of racial and ethnic separatism advocated by the multiculturalists. A traditional motto of the United States has been "e pluribus unum": out of many heritages, one people. The multiculturalists notwithstanding, the United States does enjoy a common culture,

itself various, changing, rich with contributions of Americans who come or whose ancestors came from every continent in the world At this moment in history an objective observer would have to say that it derives chiefly from the experience of Western Civilization, and especially from England, whose languages and institutions are the most copious springs from which American culture draws its life.

Quoting Benjamin Franklin's grimly accurate observation that if we do not hang together then assuredly we will all hang separately, Dean Kagan concludes that students will be profoundly handicapped if they do not acquaint themselves with our common culture and that, consequently, there is a "great need" to make the Western heritage "the central and common study in American schools, colleges and universities today."

Predictably, the reaction at Yale to Dean Kagan's plea for the priority of Western culture was mostly hostile. There have been angry meetings with the dean, denunciations of his ideas, student demands for greater "diversity," etc. According to The Yale Herald, many "freshpeople" found his address "quite disturbing." "My parents were very frightened to leave me here," one student reports. The editor of another student newspaper was quoted as saying that "Taking European culture as the center is not only ridiculous, it is the seed of racism." Dean Kagan himself was roundly denounced as "intolerant," "paternalistic," even "racist." "Why can't these academic fascists leave us alone?" screamed a Yale senior in an editorial for The Yale Daily News. "I refer, of course to all the Aristotle-quoting Allan Bloom clones who insist on wasting campus newsprint convincing us that 'Western Culture' ought to be forced down our intellectual throats..." This fine product of an elite liberal-arts education confessed that he dropped a literature course because he found *The Odyssey* "boring."

Of course there have been students who spoke out in support of Dean Kagan. And in judging his critics, we should not underestimate the element of adolescent grandstanding, which is almost always an important ingredient in student agitation. But the widespread and shockingly philistine animus against Western culture evident in the student response at Yale, together with the growing spirit of ethnic and racial separatism, are grounds for deep concern. It is difficult not to admire Dean Kagan's courageous and clear-eyed defense of our common culture and our common humanity. At the same time, it is equally difficult not to see in the angry response it elicited a preview of that special brand of intolerance and intellectual conformity that the demand for multiculturalism is fostering on campuses across the country.

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