The New Criterion

Notes & Comments December 2021

The new order

On the University of Austin.

There are a handful of institutions that have not succumbed to the various madnesses affecting the culture of higher education—Hillsdale College, Grove City, St. Thomas Aquinas, and sundry others. But we desperately need new institutions to replace the ones shattered on the shoals of political correctness. We are pleased to report, therefore, on the advent of the University of Austin, a new liberal arts college dedicated to the "fearless pursuit of truth."

That's easy to say. Harvard’s motto, after all, is Veritas—stop sniggering—and Yale’s is Lux et veritas. Does anyone believe it any longer? Those words are empty at most colleges and universities because the institutions have bartered truth for "wokeness" and the imperatives of identity politics. So, skepticism is justified. On its website, uaustin.org, the University of Austin has a list of frequently asked questions. One in particular caught our notice. "Nearly every university says it stands for freedom of inquiry. What’s different about your university?" Answer: "We mean it." They continue: "We are alarmed by the illiberalism and censoriousness prevalent in America’s most prestigious universities and what it augurs for the country. But we know that there are enough of us who still believe in the core purpose of higher education, the pursuit of truth."

What imparts confidence in this declaration are the people behind it. The president is Pano Kanelos, formerly the president of St. John’s College in Annapolis. On its board of advisors is a robust group of scholars and public intellectuals including the historian Niall Ferguson, the journalist Bari Weiss, the evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker, the mathematician and former president of the University of Chicago Robert Zimmer, the historian Wilfred M. McClay, the classicist Joshua T. Katz, and others of similar distinction. The university will open its doors this coming summer with a program for "top students from other universities" to embark on a "spirited discussion about the most provocative questions that often lead to censorship or self-censorship in many universities." In the fall of 2022, the university will begin offering several MA programs. In the fall of 2024, Kanelos hopes to launch the university’s undergraduate college. His is a bold and indeed a risky undertaking, but one that we wholeheartedly support. The educational establishment in this country is worse than moribund. It is a disaster—and not (to adapt an image from the philosopher David Stove) a static disaster like a bombed-out building. No, it is the active, contagious kind, like a badly leaking
nuclear reactor or an outbreak of foot and mouth disease. The time for remedial tinkering is over. New institutions are needed if we are to keep that old flame of free inquiry alive. We welcome the University of Austin to the fray.