

The appalling state of liturgy in the West cannot be remedied without a drastic cure of the underlying theology. If belief determines worship, there is obviously some radical work necessary in Western belief before there can be even the faintest hope of liturgical reform. The current musical expression in the Latin liturgy may be a true expression of faith; if so, it can only be said that the Faith has become an anemic shadow of itself, for the robust faith of missionaries and

martyrs is seldom in evidence. The state of liturgical music in the Latin Church is symptomatic of a wider problem, a deadly theological cancer gnawing away at the vitals not only of the Church in the West, but of the Church Universal.

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The Brave New World Order: America as a Cultural Vacuum

Thomas Storck

In Robert Louis Stevenson's adventure novel, *Kidnapped*, the protagonists in their wanderings through the Highlands of Scotland come into a region called the Braes of Balquhider.

No great clan held rule there; it was filled and disputed by small sects, and broken remnants, and what they call "chiefless folk," driven into the wild country about the springs of Forth and Teith by the advance of the Campbells.

One of the aspects of Highland life most noted and celebrated in this novel is the connection of the individual to his chief and his clan. This connection involves both great personal loyalty to the person of the chief, but, in addition, an individual's own personal identity depends upon his link with his clan. It was this which placed an individual, which made him something on the earth with roots, instead of one of the "chiefless folk." Without that he was someone cut off, as it were, not just from his own people, but from the whole human race, an atom in the void, hitting against other atoms, who themselves were moving at random in empty space.

The reason that some rooted connection was required for one to be able to relate to his fellows was that man was not conceived as existing for himself under the terms that he himself creates. Just as a letter of the alphabet has meaning only when it is in its place alongside of the other letters, whether that place is first or last, so man has purpose and meaning and relation with others only when he is in his place, alongside of his fellows. A single letter wrenched from its series is an absurdity. No words can be formed of it; in fact, it would be unrecognizable as a particle of a language. The same may be said of a human being. The Scotland of the 18th century looked on one torn away from his context as a lone

letter, meaningless, a sort of freak. Moreover, the development of the unity of the clan and of its common way of life or culture took place over many centuries and in dialog, as it were, with the soil, the rocks, the waters, the animals, of the place where they lived. Eventually, when the Gospel was brought to Scotland, its light was diffused throughout this culture and brought new elements from afar. But through all this the culture developed in an organic fashion, in touch with both the people and their environment.

This way of life, whether of the Highlands of Scotland, or of any other traditional place, proposed a certain definition of man. In this definition man means something only if somehow rooted in a place and among a people. Consider the following more recent statement of the same truth: "A person becomes a non-person if he/she is denied his/her identity, language, culture, customs, traditions, history. Such a person loses all his/her creative powers." (Ismael Rodriguez Bou, "Culture and Education in Puerto Rico.")

This statement was made in the very interesting context of the debate on Puerto Rico over the question of the political status of that unhappy island—should Puerto Rico become a state of the United States, continue in its present political arrangement, or become independent? And to many Puerto Ricans it seems that to become Americans in the full sense, it would be necessary for them to give up whatever being Puerto Rican entails. I will return to the quotation—and this question—later, but in the meantime the question of becoming fully American brings up the question of how America, meaning here the United States, treats of this matter of the definition of man within his historical and cultural context. If to 18th century Scotland someone had and found meaning

only in relation to his chief and clan, what does the United States offer in this regard? What sort of definition of ourselves does it hold out?

The definition of what it means to be a human person that is proposed by the United States is implicit in the image we commonly have of this country. Our history as a political entity extends back only to 1776, at which time, for many, perhaps most, of us, not one of our ancestors lived within the bounds of the thirteen English colonies. But, we are told, this should not trouble us. We are all generously invited to appropriate for ourselves our status as descendants of those rebellious colonists and to make their tradition our own, and indeed to extend it back to the first English settlements in North America, to the Pilgrims and Jamestown, and back even further to England to capture such events as the signing of Magna Carta, events that are held to have contributed to the formation of American historical and political tradition. But in reality, as we all know, our actual histories are many and disparate, some indeed to England, most to other European countries, many to Africa, increasingly many to Asia. And to an important element of the population, the Hispanics, the historical tradition extending ultimately to Europe has been incarnated for over five hundred years in other parts of the Americas and with very different historical landmarks and memories.

Now what does all this mean? If to a Scotsman cultural identity was derived in the first instance from immemorial identification with a clan, how can the United States urge its citizens to forget about their real historical and cultural past and assume a tradition and history going back only a mere two hundred years? America does this because she in effect proposes a totally new definition of man. America is not interested, except in the most superficial way, in the historical and cultural roots of the many people who have come to live here, because America conceives that she has something much better to offer. The following series of quotes will make this a little clearer.

It cannot be denied, but by those who would dispute against the sun, that with America, and in America, a new era commences in human affairs.

—Daniel Webster, "A Discourse in Commemoration of the Lives and Services of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson," August 2, 1826

We are provincials no longer.... And yet we are not the less Americans on that account. We shall be the more American if we but remain true to the principles in which we have been bred. They are not the principles of a province or of a single continent. We have known and boasted all along that they were the principles of a liberated mankind.

—Woodrow Wilson, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1917

Under the eternal urge of freedom we became an independent Nation. A little less than fifty years later that freedom and independence were reasserted in the face of all the world, and guarded, supported, and secured by the Monroe doctrine.... We made freedom a birthright. We extended our domain over distant islands in order to safeguard our own interests and accepted the consequent obligation to bestow justice and liberty upon less favored peoples.... Throughout all these experiences we have enlarged our freedom, we have strengthened our independence. We have been, and propose to be, more and more American.

—Calvin Coolidge, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1925.

America is not a piece of geography between two oceans and two borders. America is an idea....

—Attributed to Senator Hubert Humphrey.

The above quotes (and many more could be found to the same effect) show, I think, that America believes that she has found an entirely new way in human history, a way in which man finds his meaning not by his link with the living past of his people and their organic institutions, but in a rational, calculated effort to bring about a new kind of life on this planet. Now it is "with America, and in America, a new era commences in human affairs." No longer need we fear becoming "chiefless folk," for our identity is no longer tied to our immemorial people and history. A new, liberated, informed citizenry has come into being, a citizenry that can invite all to join it in its endeavor of enlightenment. This altogether new nation invites everyone to appropriate for himself its history, embodied in its War of Independence and the formation of its government. It does not matter whether any of our actual ancestors were here or not at the time. For the principles we are invited to embrace are those of "liberated mankind" itself, and our work is universal, on behalf of no less than "human liberty and human happiness." And if your real ancestors were of some of the "less favored peoples," then rejoice all the more that you have rejected them and all they stood for as you become "more and more American."

Above I placed a recent quote from a Puerto Rican writer which proposes a definition of man that essentially accords with that of traditional Scotland, and indeed, of the traditions of all of Europe and, I daresay, of the entire world. What answer does the United States make to that definition? When she invites all to appropriate for themselves a history that is not theirs, does she render us non-persons, as we deny our "identity, language, culture, customs, traditions, history?" I think that the answer the United States would make to this charge is to maintain that these things, though doubtless nice in their place, are not of supreme importance. What matter that the cultural, intellectual, historical traditions that are in fact native to you are lost? Something greater is present here, something that goes to the bedrock of human nature,

something that wipes away the cobwebs of the crusty traditions and customs of the Old World. The New Man is being created here, this is the *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, as our Great Seal proclaims, the *New Order of the Ages*.

It should be obvious that there are profound differences between the philosophy of man that America upholds and that of traditional mankind. America is full of "chiefless folk," and instead of deploring it, she celebrates it and invites us all to celebrate with her. If America is an "idea," then this idea can be extended over the entire world, and instead of man being defined by his roots and ties, he will be a liberated atom in a rational void.

Unfortunately, most Americans have evinced all too little discomfort with this state of affairs. Most of us have been eager to embrace the material goods delivered, or at least promised, by the new country, and to let others worry about the question of lost cultures and such matters. The Puerto Ricans who desire statehood for their island are the latest case in point. They quote statistic after statistic about the economy and taxation and ignore questions of personal and cultural identity. The case of Puerto Rico, moreover, is a very interesting one, for as Hispanics, Puerto Ricans are the heirs to an extremely rich historical, intellectual and cultural tradition, a tradition which differs markedly from that of the English settlers of North America. Is it possible for an Hispanic to give up his own tradition in order to "become an American?" In order to do so Hispanics would have to give up the historical landmarks that define their own culture. For example, the Laws of the Indies, the generally humane and exemplary legal code set forth by the Spanish crown for governing the New World and its native inhabitants: where do they stand in the national American mythology? Can they rate beside the Mayflower Compact? Or the Virgin of Guadalupe—could she ever compare with George Washington praying at Valley Forge? I remember once seeing an exhibit at a state university of facsimiles of historical documents that were held to have contributed to the formation of the United States. They began with Magna Carta and included documents such as the Petition of Right, the English Bill of Rights and of course our own Declaration and Constitution. But how could someone with the equally venerable heritage of Spain and Spanish America appropriate all of this for himself without denying everything that he is? Perhaps without unmaking himself as a human being? Unless culture and history have no meaning, and we are best understood simply as eating/drinking/procreating beasts, then I do not see how one can simply divest himself of that which links him with history and mankind. But what else does the United

States offer to anyone?

Hispanics are simply the most extreme example, since they are relatively unassimilated and live right next door to a part of their own homeland. But most of us are in fundamentally the same situation, though the passage of two or three or more generations of ardent and active assimilation makes it easier to forget. But before saying how I personally look at this, we should briefly turn to America's latest attempt to deal with the



question of cultural identity, the practice of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism seems to offer a remedy for the situation I have sketched, that of requiring everyone to pretend he had an ancestor on the Mayflower. It affirms the worth of varying traditions that have formed the peoples of the United States, and indeed, often seems to value their traditions and experiences above those of the traditional majority. But what really is going on here? I would argue that multiculturalism, as it is

commonly understood, only trivializes the cultures it purports to embrace, rendering them little more than quaint collections of customs, and that its real goal is relativism and the promotion of Anglo-Saxon secular liberalism. Again, let us look at Hispanics.

Hispanic civilization came to this hemisphere as a militantly Catholic and Latin embodiment of late medieval culture. It brought, besides the Faith, Roman law, universities, scholastic philosophy, the printing press, Renaissance and baroque music and art, European cities; in short, the spiritual, intellectual and social life of Western tradition. But is this what the multiculturalists value? Instead they absurdly classify Hispanics, the very people who brought the West to America, as a non-Western minority! They are not interested in real Hispanic culture, for in it are the very things they so much hate and fear about their own ancestors, above all, the Catholic faith. But by contrasting selected aspects of Latino life with their own narrow and selective version of Western civilization (which they equate with the scientific rationalism and liberal atomism of the last few centuries), our current official guardians of the cultural establishment manage at the same time to denigrate the real West and pretend to foster Hispanic culture. But by emptying Hispanic culture of its spiritual and intellectual content, they simply advance the notion of cultural relativism and thus end up advancing their own orphaned and bastard segment of Western culture—a segment that arose only with Descartes and Locke.

In short, multiculturalism is an effort to use other cultures to create the impression that all is flux, and to assert that any definitive judgment about right and wrong or about truth is a kind of cultural imperialism. Were its upholders

truly interested in, for example, other religions and their adherents, they would have to recognize that their own secularism is an affront not merely to orthodox Catholics or conservative Protestants, but to every religion. Thus the very groups whose cultures they supposedly foster are in fact destroyed by their efforts and teachings, for cultural relativism ultimately teaches the triviality of every culture except modern Western secularism.

Though I do not know whether many others feel the need to identify with a historical tradition in order to be whole, I admit that I certainly do. I am not at all comfortable with being of the "chiefless folk." And the solution to the dilemma for me—heir to decades of assimilating forebears—is to look upon all of traditional Europe as my cultural home, since in my case any but the slimmest of living links with any particular European nation has been broken. Moreover, as a matter of fact, my ancestors did come from more than one part of that continent. So though I do not have the immediate and everyday richness of culture that Hispanics can, and should, dwell in, the intellectual and cultural life of European civilization makes me feel not quite so much lost. America cannot take that from me and try to satisfy me with vain dreams of a new land of liberty and a new beginning of the human race. And though I lack the daily cultural customs that characterize one for whom culture is something living, not just something taken from books, pictures and records, still I am glad and grateful for what I can do and can try to be. It is likely to be all that there will be for a long time.

I fear, however, that what I just said will give the wrong impression. I do not, for example, regret that my accent betrays me as an American or that I hold silverware in the American fashion, or indeed, that my whole appearance and

behavior show that I am an American. That is not what I mean. America, the United States, as a place where people dwell and live in a particular way, insofar as that way of living can be separated from its political ideology, I recognize as my home. I am not a European. I only do not want us to cut our cultural roots, to cast aside everything that makes us part of the human race, in an Enlightenment dream of making a new beginning and forging a new man. It is less America that I reject than the idea of America, the idea that so many of our politicians and orators have seen as the essence of being American. But, paradoxically, if, as Wilson said, the principles of America are those of "a liberated mankind," they have little or nothing to do with how we actually live in this spot of earth. Hitherto, the real America has been a society of mostly descendents of Europeans living across the ocean from Europe. To the extent that we tried not simply to adapt but to *deny* our European heritage, we tried to create the myth of America as the New Order of the Ages, an incarnate idea that offered liberation to all the "less favored peoples" of the world. But I think it is possible to accept America as simply a place where people dwell across the sea from their original home. Of course, what America will become if those whose origins are in Europe become a minority is another story. But for the time being, at least, I think we can overcome our status as "chiefless folk" or we take hold of what are the only roots we have or can ever have, those that have nourished our ancestors for centuries and necessarily are our way of connecting to the rest of the human race. These prevent us from being atoms in the void, even the void of a "liberated mankind."

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