



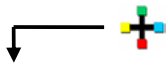
## Culture, Rationality and the Unity of the Human Race

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A recent letter from a correspondent in the USA suggested that our project should be regarded as a Christian post-script to Alan Bloom's best seller "The Closing of the American Mind". In re-reading Alain Finkielkraut's "The Undoing of thought" I have had a similar reflection, for both books protest against contemporary cultural disintegration in the name of a classical vision of reason. And a response to this suggestion leads straight into three questions which our friendly critics often pose: "Why do you keep on bashing the Enlightenment?", "What do you mean by "Our Culture?", and "Why do we not hear more Third World voices in your programme?"

Finkielkraut begins with that splendid vision of the unity of the human race which inspired the thinkers of the French Enlightenment. The human person whose freedom and autonomy were celebrated in the affirmation of the rights of man was not French or German or Chinese. Human reason is one under whatever sky, and it provides the basis for human unity. When clinging superstition is cleaned away, all human beings will see things as they are. Against this claim and its embodiment in the military expansion of France came the German reaction in such writers as Herder, who affirmed the primacy of the Volksgeist, the spirit which is embodied and expressed in the whole culture of a people. What the Enlightenment dismissed as old-fashioned traditions and superstitions are the very substance of which a nation's life is constituted. Nations are not humanly contrived associations based on the rational realities by which the individual is sustained. Loyalty to nation transcends every other claim. The history of nationalism in Europe bears terrible testimony to the power of this idea. At the end of the most devastating of these international wars, and as part of the peace settlement, UNESCO was founded with the hope (an authentic Enlightenment hope) that the universal spread of education would make possible a global human society free from war.

And now comes, says, Finkielkraut, the supreme irony. It was in the power of the ideology of the Enlightenment that European powers invaded the whole world with the ideas and practices that stemmed from the Enlightenment - technology, 'modern' education and medicine, capitalist economics and (in its more benevolent forms) the idea of democracy - 'one man one vote'. But the

power which the peoples of the Third World gradually mobilised against this invasion was the power of the Volksgeist. The spiritual power of the traditional cultures of the suppressed peoples was the weapon used against the power of the 'Western' ideology. And Europe, shattered by its devastation wars, had lost its faith in the universal validity of its civilisation.

Decolonisation began. UNESCO had to perform an ideological somersault. It became the defender of threatened cultures. Multiculturalism replaced the idea of the universal sway of rationality. 'Culture' became something exempt from universal canons of reason or of moral judgement. The way had been prepared for the somersault by the rise of the sciences of anthropology and sociology, which used the tools fashioned by the Enlightenment to give scientific respectability of what the 18th Century philosophies had dismissed as superstition.

And the ironies multiply. The leadership in the revolt of colonised nations was taken, could only be taken, by those who had absorbed through a western education the ideas of the Enlightenment. But the process of decolonisation required that these be suppressed in the interests of national unity. The one-party state became the norm and dissent was treason to the nation. At the same time in Europe multiculturalism became the accept norm among 'enlightened' people. In 1985 the College de France laid down as the first of a series of educational principles for the nation: 'The Unity of Science and the Plurality of Cultures'. Human understanding is thus bifurcated into a world where norms of reason have universal authority, and another world – 'culture' – which is exempt from these norms. 'Culture' is something which is exempt from any universally valid judgments of truth or right. There is not one human race but a multitude of separate human cultures. The 'man' whose 'rights' the Enlightenment celebrated no longer exists: there are only Europeans, Indians, Chinese, Polynesian, Bantu, or whatever. And since in the modern world cultures are not geographically separated but mixed, we have the multicultural society and – inevitably – the multicultural individual, for whom there are no norms of truth or right. We have arrived at the world of Alan Bloom. If it is 'my culture' it is OK.

This summary gives very little impression of the brilliance of Finkelkraut's analysis with its sharp thrusts against both left and right in the current political scene. It prompts, for me at least, three reflections.

The first is admiration, for the Enlightenment was, in one of its aspects, a magnificent vision of the potential unity of the human race. We have to ask why that vision failed, why it provoked a violent reaction against human unity. Yet this reaction is ambiguous. The newly independent nations, delivered from colonial rule, eagerly seek to acquire the science and technology which the Enlightenment produced and are – inevitably – being profoundly changed in their corporate spiritual life in the process. In spite of the College de France human understanding of the world cannot be finally bifurcated into 'science' and 'culture'. One could even say that after decolonisation the 'Third World' is becoming more rapidly and fully integrated into the 'modern' world than it was before. The issues which the 'Gospel and Our Culture' seeks to tackle are also the problems of the churches in the 'Third World', as our post-bag testifies.

The second reflection concerns the role

of Europe. As the year 1992 approaches the question becomes more and more serious: 'Is Europe merely the name for a market place, or does Europe have a greater significance in the history of the human race?' Thoughtful Christians in Europe are rightly conscience-stricken about the wrongs Europe has done to the rest of the world. But godly repentance must include the taking of full responsibility for what is part. For better or for worse, the ideas developed in Europe are still shaping the agenda for most of the world. Europeans cannot evade the responsibilities that involves. And among those responsibilities is a profound self-questioning of our own history. In the Enlightenment and what followed, Europe made a bid for the unity of the human race, and it

failed. We have to ask 'What went wrong?' Only if we ask that question is our repentance serious. That is why this programme concentrates primarily on issues in the history of European thought.

The third reflection is this. If human reason, liberated from 'superstition', does not provide the basis for human unity, what does? My daily readings for the past three weeks have taken me through Job's agonised efforts to make sense of the dark irrationality of human affairs. In the 28th chapter there is an eloquent description of the wonders of technology as it was then practised. But technology cannot answer the question 'Where shall wisdom be found?' and it is only when the living god speaks his own word that Job finds that in which his restless mind can rest. Our technology has made this planet 'one world' in a sense never before contemplated. But this produces not more unity but more conflict. There was a time when Christians joined with others in thinking that our 'civilisation' was the key to making one world. (Traces of that belief still linger on in the movement for 'world-development', which means assisting the rest of the world to follow the way Europe and its off-shoots have gone). Multi-culturalism is a reaction against this, but it seems that nothing can stop the spread of western science and technology and these can never be totally amputated from the tree on which they have grown. What is the reality which could make possible the unity of the human race? Only the deed of the one who is creator and lord. And that deed, the word made flesh in the ministry, death and resurrection of him in whom all things hold together, has been done. It is in the field of public truth, of education and politics and economics, that the Church has to make this known, and make it credible through the witness of a community in which people of many cultures acknowledge one truth and one supreme good.

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