

A Kind of Compulsory Chapel

Multiculturalism is a campaign to lower America's moral status

BY GEORGE F. WILL

THE HIGH SCHOOL TEST ASKED STUDENTS TO IDENTIFY the "Hellenic epic which established egotistical individualism as heroic." The correct answer was "The Iliad," the message of the question being this: Individualism is egotistical and egoism, rather than anything more noble, defines Western civilization. When a University of Pennsylvania student wrote of "my deep regard for the individual," an administrator underlined the word "individual" and wrote back: "This is a RED FLAG phrase today, which is considered by many to be RACIST. Arguments that champion the individual over the group ultimately privileges [sic] the 'individuals' belonging to the largest dominant group."

Asked what her fifth and sixth grade pupils learn about George Washington, a teacher says: "That he was the first president, that he was a slave owner, that he was rich—not much." She does teach about another white male: Eli Whitney. She says her pupils "know that he stole his invention from a woman who didn't patent it." How does the teacher know this? "Another teacher told me."

During the 1992 quincennial a public education group produced a study guide, "Rethinking Columbus," with chapter titles such as "Once Upon a Genocide" and "George Washington: Speculator in Native Lands." A Cornell residence hall director removed pictures of herself and her husband when she was accused, because of the pictures, of heterosexism. At a Cornell training session for resident advisers, an X-rated homosexual movie was shown and pictures were taken of the advisers' reactions, to detect homophobic squeamishness.

Some Brookline, Mass., parents were denounced by public school officials as "censors" because they wanted to put back into the curriculum an advanced placement course on European history. The course had been found "incompatible with multiculturalism," presumably because it did not "validate" the self-esteem and contribute to the cultural "legitimization" of non-Europeans. Here is a multiple choice exam question from Brookline: "A characteristic of the 13 English colonies was (a) complete religious freedom, (b) free high school education, (c) class distinctions, or (d) universal voting." "C" is the correct answer to this sly question that Richard Bernstein rightly says is "designed to demonstrate that something negative was the sole feature all the colonies had in common."

Critics of Bernstein's invaluable new book, "Dictatorship of Virtue: Multiculturalism and the Battle for America's Future," from which these stories are culled, dismiss his meticulous reporting as "anecdotal," which is today's preferred description of inconvenient evidence. But a multitude of anecdotes make a pattern and the book frames with an explanatory theory the ugly picture of the depredations done in the name of "diversity." Bernstein, a reporter for The New York Times, is a liberal who is angry about the multiculturalists' attempts to smother intellectual diversity beneath "a thick glue of piousness."

What explains "the middle-class bureaucrats and education entrepreneurs, the guilty white liberals and aging flower chil-

dren of the 1960s who most aggressively press the multiculturalist agenda"? Says Bernstein, "Thirty years ago, something shifted in the national mind." The broad contours of America's demography have not changed radically since the mid-1960s, and the foreign-born percentage of the population is much smaller than in 1920. What, then, accounts for today's multiculturalist frenzy?

Bernstein flinches from baldly stating the simple fact that many cultural institutions (including the Smithsonian, busy with vilifications of American history) have fallen into the hands of people who despise America. However, when he dissects the so-called "massive increase in hate crimes" in Minnesota—yes, Minnesota—he concludes, "There is a sizable industry of exaggeration that combines with a fear of appearing complacent about racism to create a misleading impression of American life." In fact, multiculturalism is a campaign to lower America's

moral status by defining the American experience in terms of myriad repressions and their victims. By rewriting history, and by using name-calling ("Racist!" "Sexist!" "Homophobe!") to inhibit debate, multiculturalists cultivate grievances, self-pity and claims to entitlements arising from victimization. Hence the education trend that Bernstein calls "the curriculum as expiation of guilt."

Multiculturalism attacks individualism by defining people as mere manifestations of groups (racial, ethnic, sexual) rather than as self-defining participants in a free society. And one way to make racial, ethnic or sexual identity primary is to destroy alternative sources of individuality and social cohesion, such as a shared history, a common culture and unifying values. Hence the multiculturalists' attempts to politicize and purge higher education curriculums. Once universities are reduced to therapeutic institutions, existing to heal victimized groups and reform the victimizing society, our trickle-down culture produces similar distortions in primary and secondary education.

The multiculturalists' mantra is "diversity," but as Bernstein demonstrates, their assumption is that all authentic groups will share the sour leftism of the multiculturalists. Authoritarian politics and banal careerism have blended as "diversity" has become a growth industry, guaranteeing academic employment for the otherwise unemployable. Multiculturalists demand more jobs, honors, attention and subsidies, all in the name of the ultimate entitlement—a "right" to adore yourself and to make others express adoration of you.

The multiculturalists are invariably humorless and often ignorant, but these are not disabilities in today's academic settings. However, multiculturalists do have a fatal flaw as a political force: They manage to be simultaneously boring and ludicrous. Multiculturalism is, as Bernstein says, a kind of compulsory chapel. Yet in spite of all its bullying and occasional cruelties, it may by now be doing more good than harm because it is producing a libertarian backlash, of which Bernstein's not-at-all boring book is a splendid example.



We are in danger of smothering debate in a 'thick glue of piousness'