

## History

The study of Civics is mere chatter if it is not disciplined by facts, namely, the record we call history. Thus the cultural engagement in the study of history is, in large part, the examination of civic ideas in action.

After a generation steeped in dates without meaning, the present fashion of historical education is “unit studies” which give -- to the period of choice -- every possible dimension except one: its relationship to other historical periods far removed in time. In this way, a study that is meant to be broad and wholistic becomes another kind of very small adventure. Well-conceived unit studies have a solid place in education, but education in history means precisely: identifying the place of each unit of history within the whole. With the comprehensive view missing, history seems merely the study of the past, any past, like those antique stores that truthfully advertise their wares: Antiques and Junque.

This is not sufficient, and not even interesting for most people. Historical education must at some point portray the broad sweep of history, the context for every event of the rise and fall of culture. Our students should come to know the individual persons who have shaped or wounded the Culture of Life; they should study their individual decisions in their civic context.

### THE RISE AND FALL OF CULTURE

The serious study of the past is the study of the rise and fall of culture, the ebb and flow of civilization, and the lives and choices of the individual men and women who advanced culture in their own time. The ultimate human questions appropriate to the study of history are: How can we live as sons of God; how can we live together as sons of God; how can we raise our children to live as sons of God; how can we justly and graciously defend our lives, households, and countries as a people of God? History can show us some of the wrong roads and some of the right ones, if we persist in seeking this information, but unfortunately, very much of what

passes for the study of history is a plain waste of time – a type of archaic gossip. Or worse: it is often an outright editing of information so as to prevent the truth from being known.

It is essential to study history seriously, not trivially: to recognize the prejudices that are common within the anti-culture and to satisfy each student of true culture with a few good, solid, research experiences showing the anti-cultural prejudices for what they are. In general, the dominant prejudices of our time are: first, that the truth of history cannot be known, and second, that the truth about religious faith is that it has always wounded culture.

### TRIVIAL PURSUIT

The denial that truth can be known is, here as elsewhere, the signature of the anti-culture. It has to be confronted in historical studies where the prevailing fashion is to assert, for example, that history is written by the conquerors and therefore we cannot know anything with clarity. This is not true because there is always evidence for the truth; it can never be completely covered. For one thing, the evidence of bigotry and falsehood in the work of conquering cultures is often right at hand and is bound to come to light when the super-culture begins to lose strength; but it comes to light sooner, if the underculture is literate.

Sometimes the anticulture goes even a step further, asserting that history is the “narrative” we tell in order to shape the upcoming generation and that we must choose our stories with that in mind. This half-truth puts the cart before the horse. Yes, what children learn in history class shapes what they believe about culture; but that is not an excuse for inserting wily and political choices into historical presentation in defiance of the truth. We are back to the fundamental issues: Can the truth be known? Is this what we want to seek?

Those who value truth and believe it can be known, seek it. Those who believe it cannot be known, don't. Those who hate the truth use education for what purposes seem profitable to themselves and talk about the impossibility of knowing truth in order to excuse their failure to seek it.

## COMPETITIONS AND MULTIPLE CHOICE

The increasing prevalence of competitions which encourage children to learn history as a type of trivial pursuit is symptomatic of a time when the meaning of history is not honestly sought. Little floating facts are the measure of a fragmented historical consciousness. This can only be challenged if we come to believe that history is worth studying as an instructive account of the way men can and cannot live together, and how they can and cannot generate cultural progress.

I might have offered this critique of multiple choice testing at any point in this essay, and I do not want to discourage any honest motivation for learning a few more facts, either of history or of anything else. I only want to insist that we cannot win the culture wars without going to the heart of the matter: truth can be known and must be sought.

## WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture in general is the sum of the deliberately, even passionately conserved beliefs and hopes, and the consequent way of life of any group of people. It's their religion, their family life, and their social customs. Because America has such a multiplicity of religious faiths, family styles, and local customs, it is hard to define -- or to build -- our culture. Public school represents one effort to smooth out the differences in favor of a Protestant, deist, or even, as time goes on, a pagan culture. Television is another proposal; music is a third.

While these influences have homogenized America to some extent, the difficulty is that the new "culture" is proposed, not lived, and lacks both coherence and genuine passion. It's a fake in many respects. Besides, it includes (as it would have to) an effort to loosen family ties, which simply is an anti-cultural act. Culture passes through the family or not at all. Even the Church cannot be the conduit of culture, only its servant: "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world."

In the study of history, we are comparing civilizations -- the outward living together of peoples, but also at cultures -- their shared inner life.

The important question is, what kind of civ-

ilization supports the depth of human life; what destroys it? How are positive civilization and culture nurtured, and by what kinds of people, indeed by which people in the long train of human biography?

Surely culture is the most misunderstood concept and also the most important question to clarify. Sometimes it is claimed that all cultures are equal, and it is taken as a form of racism to compare them.

In this connection, let me just remind you that the ships that carried Columbus across the Atlantic were manned by men of several different races, but one culture. Culture is not about race, but about a concept of human nature and how to nurture it. Enforced cultural relativity -- the insistence on the equality of all cultures -- is simply ignorant and ridiculous. The Mayas practiced infant sacrifice. The communists destroyed family-based agriculture in favor of government farms. A few moments of thought -- and some historical study -- will quickly bring up many examples of ways of life that are not merely backward or badly worked out but fundamentally opposed to the nature of the human person.

It is the study of history that is supposed to help students become aware of these examples, be warned by them, and be prepared to avoid the political and social decisions that could bring them back to life. Some students will be called into government and social service as surely as some are called to religious life. The study of history is their foundation.