

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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Who Are We Now?

A Survey of Recent Articles

Collective identities were once thought to be more or less timeless. It meant one thing to be an American or an Italian, and that thing changed very little over the years. But that old self-assurance has been dissolved. Today, we are acutely aware that what it means to be an American now is rather different from what it meant in George Washington's day. Some thinkers believe that the change runs even deeper than that. For Americans and Europeans, and their common civilization, these people believe, this is a time of massive identity crisis.

Just a half-century ago, it was widely said that the United States was the heir of Western civilization, notes James Kurth, a political scientist at Swarthmore College, writing in *The Intercollegiate Review* (Fall 2003–Spring 2004). "Today, Western civilization is almost never mentioned, much less promoted, in political and intellectual discourse, either in America or in Europe. When it is mentioned among Western elites, the traditions of the West are almost always an object of criticism or contempt."

Invented by a few Europeans in the early 20th century, the term "Western civilization" was regarded, given the rise of America, as a necessary revision of the older idea of "European civilization." America's intervention in World War I lent power to the more inclusive coinage, which was invoked

again in World War II and the Cold War.

Until recent decades, Western civilization was widely understood to be derived from three traditions: the classical culture of Greece and Rome, Christianity, and the Enlightenment. But the only tradition today's Western elites embrace is that of the Enlightenment, according to Kurth. For American political and economic elites, that mainly means the British Enlightenment, with its stress on individual liberty, institutionalized in liberal democracy and free markets. For European elites, as well as American intellectuals, it largely means the French Enlightenment, "with its emphasis on the rationalism of elites, institutionalized in bureaucratic authority, and the credentialed society." The old belief in Western civilization has given way to a commitment to "a global civilization, in which multicultural and transnational elites will administer (or impose) their notions of human rights."

But can—or should—the past be so easily jettisoned? The preamble to the text of the proposed European Union constitution makes no mention of Christianity's historic role in "educating and spiritually unifying" Europe's tribes and nations, notes Louis Dupré, a Belgian-born emeritus professor of the philosophy of religion at Yale University. Yet the continent's identity is in part spiritual, he writes in *Commonweal* (March 26, 2004). "Europe's identity has never been primarily geographical: Its boundaries re-

mained vague in antiquity, and even today they appear not quite settled. Ever since the Greeks, its name has referred to an ideal entity.”

Political and economic unification is thus not enough for Dupré. Europe also needs “a strong awareness of a distinctive cultural and spiritual identity.” That doesn’t mean trying to resurrect the ideal of a Christian commonwealth. “Although the majority of Europeans, in contrast to the writers of the new EU constitution, do fully recognize their debt to the Christian tradition, many no longer consider themselves believers.” Moreover, those nostalgic for “the medieval *res publica christiana*” should face the fact that it never was hospitable to outsiders, such as Muslims, who now make up a significant part of the European population. The new Europe needs a more inclusive base.

France, acting in accord with its own national identity, is a leader in the secularist drive at work in the drafting of the new EU constitution, observes Dupré. “The French tradition of *laïcité* [public secularism] dates from the 18th century and was sealed in the revolutions of 1789 and 1848.” In keeping with that republican tradition, President Jacques Chirac recently banned Muslim headscarves, conspicuous Christian crosses, and other religious symbols in his country’s public schools.

But France needs to revise the tradition of *laïcité*, suggests John R. Bowen, a professor of arts and sciences at Washington University in St. Louis. “Neither the much-weakened Catholic Church nor the millions of Muslim citizens deny the authority of the French state. There are real dangers to the Republic, but they are to be found in growing intolerance and disrespect, not in the desire to dress and act consistently, in public and in private, as a Muslim citizen of France,” he writes in *Boston Review* (Feb.–March 2004). If France “shows itself to be openly intolerant of the free expression of religious beliefs and norms in public life,” it is hardly likely that “teachers’ tasks of encouraging open dialogue across religious lines and instilling respect for the French Republic” will have been made easier.

In the controversy over Muslim girls’ wearing headscarves in school, “a certain ‘Jacobin’ fundamentalism comes to the surface,” says

Charles Taylor, an emeritus professor of philosophy at McGill University, in Montreal, writing in *The Responsive Community* (Fall 2003; Winter 2003–04). “The general principle of state neutrality, indispensable in a modern diverse democracy, is metaphysically fused with a particular historical way of realizing it, and the latter is rendered as nonnegotiable as the former.” It’s “a panic reaction,” he says, “understandable [but] disastrous.”

“Debates over national identity are a pervasive characteristic of our time,” observes the noted Harvard University political scientist Samuel P. Huntington in *The National Interest* (Spring 2004). In the United States, elites and the general public are more and more at odds over such questions. While the public overwhelmingly remains nationalistic, the business, professional, intellectual, and academic elites increasingly prefer “cosmopolitanism.” Philosopher Martha Nussbaum, of the University of Chicago, for instance, deems patriotism morally suspect, and maintains that people should pledge allegiance to the “worldwide community of human beings.”

Intense controversy has erupted over Huntington’s argument elsewhere (see p. 97) that Hispanic immigrants threaten to undermine America’s core identity. Taylor notes that it’s not only in the United States that immigrants “seem to be operating now with the sense of their eventual role in codetermining the culture, rather than this arising only retrospectively, as with earlier immigrants.”

Whether in America or France, the dilemma is the same, Taylor observes, and it is built into democracy itself: On the one hand, a democracy needs “strong cohesion around a political identity,” which provides “a strong temptation to exclude those who can’t or won’t fit easily.” On the other hand, such exclusion, “besides being profoundly morally objectionable,” runs counter to the idea of popular sovereignty, of government by *all* the people.

The way to resolve the dilemma is to work toward “a creative redefinition” of political identity, Taylor argues. “Political identities have to be worked out, negotiated, creatively compromised between peoples who have to or want to live together under the same political roof.” The resulting identities “are never meant to last forever, but have to be discovered [or] invented anew by succeeding generations.”