

# CULTURAL RESTORATION AND THE WEST

Aaron Urbanczyk

*The Problem with Multiculturalism: The Uniqueness and Universality of Western Civilization*  
by John M. Headley (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2014)

*Cultural Renewal: Restoring the Liberal and Fine Arts*  
by Arthur Pontynen (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2015)

There is no shortage of books on the demise of Western civilization and the ills of modern culture. In fact, the field is rather crowded. This review explores two newcomers to that field: John M. Headley's *The Problem with Multiculturalism: The Uniqueness and Universality of Western Civilization*, and Arthur Pontynen's *Cultural Renewal: Restoring the Liberal and Fine Arts*. What is refreshing is that neither of these texts is a predictable chorus of familiar cultural and civilizational woes. Both Headley and Pontynen address our current state of cultural crisis from new, though differing, perspectives—ones well worth considering.

John M. Headley's little book, just over one hundred pages, might better be understood by its subtitle. *The Problem with Multiculturalism* might invite the reader to anticipate a thorough critique of the ubiquitous ideological multiculturalism in higher education and culture. The subtitle better describes Headley's project: *The Uniqueness and Universality of Western Civilization*. Fortunately, the book spends relatively little time defining and critiquing multiculturalism and much more time in defining what is unique about the West.

The book's beauty is its refreshingly substantive exploration of Western civilization's unique universality. Here the reader must be prepared for something provocative and unconventional. Many texts dealing with the decline of the West rightly lament the loss of its Judeo-Christian character—the loss of the religious and transcendent foundation of Western civilization. Headley argues, in a certain sense, just the opposite: what is unique about the West is not its religion, per se, but its invention of the secular. Yet he makes this argument in a fashion deeply connected to the West's Christian history and character.

A historian by training, Headley begins his text by tracing "civilization's" conceptual and etymological history. Though first used by the Marquis de Mirabeau in 1757, the concept of civilization has deep roots in the Classical Greek and Latin notions of *polis* and *civitas*. These notions evolved in Europe into the cultural ideal of "civility," understood as politeness, refinement, and cultivated human behavior. Yet Headley demonstrates that "civilization" is a uniquely modern concept, and one with an inherently worldly orientation. While monasteries and courts were incubators of cultivated civility during the High Middle Ages, it wasn't until early modernity that "civilization" emerged

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as a cultural ideal—and it's important to note that this era was one of unprecedented global expansion.

Headley explores representative figures of the era involved in the colonization/evangelization of the New World, such as the “Jesuit-turned-humanist” Giovanni Botero, the humanist Polydore Vergil, the Jesuit missionary José de Acosta, and the Spanish viceroy of Peru, Francisco de Toledo. Such figures demonstrate over and over how the European mind couldn't easily distinguish the boundaries between evangelizing and civilizing newly discovered peoples. In fact, it's altogether unclear which one is the ultimate objective. For Vergil, “civilization, in the form of more temperate manners, was the true purpose of the Christian faith,” and “by equating civility with Christian gentleness and courteousness, [Botero] made Christ the apostle of courtesy.” Was becoming civilized the preamble to and the benefit of receiving the Christian faith, or was propagating Christianity merely the convenient tool for civilizing non-Western peoples? Which was more important? This was an open question to the early modern European mind, yet Headley masterfully demonstrates that the emergence of “civilization” in modernity had a uniquely secular, worldly, and extra-religious dimension to it.

In what, then, lies the uniqueness of Western civilization? Headley argues that the West alone in world history best understands how to optimize the ordering of *this world*—the realm of the secular. In fact, one might say the West invented the notion in its modern sense. His use of the term “secular” largely avoids the polemical and negative denotation (i.e., a humanly oriented philosophy with a principled hostility toward the religious). Rather, secularity, or secularization, entails an “ability to create a neutralizing medium with expanding frontiers—a

medium that rejects the inevitable particularisms harbored or generated by religion, no matter how universal and all-inclusive that religion may understand itself to be.” This neutralizing medium is the social and political space of communal worldly human life, one not immediately derived from any sectarian religious perspective. Secularity is characterized by a commitment to the following attributes: a common humanity, universal human rights, the legitimacy of political dissent, tolerance of diversity, and a tendency toward a historically conditioned reflexivity and questioning of itself.

And what is the result of this invention of the secular? Headley argues that Western secularity is essentially characterized by “a proclivity to create and expand programs, practices, and institutions that are suited not just to [the West] itself but also to all others—in appropriately modified form, to humankind in general.” One need only consider the last century to see the obvious truth of Headley's conclusion: at a global level one finds the embracing of democracy, the universal insistence upon human rights, and the privileging of a globally connected common humanity.

What Headley finds particularly objectionable among multiculturalists is the revisionist tendency to “endow other cultures with liberal values that they do not in fact possess,” as if the West's unique contributions enumerated above were not its gifts to the world but were spontaneously present in other cultures, perhaps even predating contact with the West. Further, the now widespread fiction—that the West's sole global imprint is aggressively violent imperialism—denies the West's true genius for universality. Headley thus argues “the time is long overdue” for a positive assessment of the West's contributions.

Yet what of Christianity? Does it play no

role in the remarkable evolution of modern secularism? The most striking feature of Headley's book is his brilliantly nuanced discussion of secularity's emergence from Christianity. Headley reminds us that Christianity is, in large part, responsible for inventing the notion of secularity that emerged in modern Europe, the very one that is with us still today. Rather than view the Renaissance and Reformation as complete ruptures from medieval Christendom, Headley considers them extensions of it along a certain trajectory—that of the secular, individual, and worldly.

In fact, Jesus of Nazareth initiates a conversation with vast implications: in Luke 20:24–25 he instructs the faithful to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and render unto God the things that are God's. By the high medieval era, Christian Europe had already long understood humanity as existing in two separate jurisdictions—one belonging to this world, the other to God, or “in medieval terms, *sacerdotium* and *imperium*, priesthood and empire.” The scriptural origins of this distinction imply deep levels of tension and incompatibility between these two orders.

In Headley's reading of history, the late medieval period collapsed under the effort to conflate the earthly and heavenly cities. In his view, Europe became too “desecularized” by Christendom; there was an “excessive penetration of the sacramental and the ecclesiastical into daily life.” He interprets the Renaissance and Reformation not so much as radical breaks from medieval Christendom as necessary readjustments. The pendulum had swung too far toward God, and equilibrium necessitated that Europe be reoriented back toward Caesar, to use the scriptural idiom. This reorientation toward the secular is the impulse behind the Renaissance, in its understanding of history and time, and the Reformation, in its relocation

of the spiritual life from external sacraments to the conscience of the individual.

Yet Headley persistently poses the question that modern historians largely refuse to consider: is secularization inescapably the child of *Christianitas*? Are secular notions of our common humanity, the linear and progressive view of history, and the notion of a common moral code inextricably tied to Christianity? Headley points to “Nicaea, with its inscription of humanity by the mysterious figure of Christ into the understanding of the Godhead,” and the powerful and unprecedented new moral code emerging from the Gospels as essentially important to understanding what secularization means to the twenty-first century. One cannot read *The Problem with Multiculturalism* and still accept the notion that secularity simply emerged in modernity as the luminous work of human reason, freed from the superstitions and absurdities of its religious past. It is a text that must not be overlooked by scholars of the left or the right who grapple with the meaning of modern secularity.

*Cultural Renewal: Restoring the Liberal and Fine Arts* by Arthur Pontynen is a different sort of book. While Headley's volume is slim and stylistically accessible, Pontynen's text is lengthy (close to three hundred pages) and written in the dense language of critical and cultural theory. Those not immediately familiar with technical terms in Western philosophy and the theoretical language of the humanities and social sciences will find the book hard going.

Though not an easy read, the book is particularly valuable. As with the Headley text, the title of Pontynen's book is not immediately the clearest indicator of its significance. *Cultural Renewal: Restoring the Liberal and Fine Arts* isn't at all a “how to” manual for the road to cultural restoration, at least not

in the practical sense. While the text does make references to Eastern cultures, primarily Chinese, *Cultural Renewal* locates most of its analysis in the West. Pontynen is at his best as a diagnostician: his book articulates with disturbing precision the intellectual and cultural trajectory of the modern and postmodern world.

While Pontynen's highly theoretical prose makes the text less accessible reading, it allows for a more precise diagnosis of our current dilemma. It begins with the self-evident observation that culture today is in a dangerous state of decline, one he identifies as "brutal," "trivialized," and "violent." This decline, in Pontynen's view, hinges upon a central conceptual distinction: "qualitative" versus "quantitative" approaches to knowledge and culture. These are useful enough terms to describe a fundamental shift in Western intellectual history.

From the time of Socrates well through the High Middle Ages, the West had a fundamentally realist epistemological orientation toward the world. Figures various as Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas maintain that the human mind is open and receptive to the truth about the natural world, humanity, and God. This tradition, also known as the *philosophia perennis*, constitutes a "qualitative" understanding of human knowledge. Mankind's open and receptive posture toward reality can distinguish between truth and falsity, insight and error, and always seeks greater insight into ultimate truths and God himself. Thus some ideas and systems are qualitatively superior to others because they are closer to the truth. Modes of thought that are qualitatively inferior are both false intellectually and barbaric at the level of culture.

Pontynen explores the consequences of the Copernican Revolution in knowledge and culture characterizing the modern

world. We've experienced a now complete paradigm shift in modernity: knowledge is no longer viewed as qualitative but quantitative. By "quantitative" Pontynen means the general epistemology of modernity: in a materialist and empiricist context, knowledge is not discovered; it's made. Meaning isn't in the world; it's fabricated by meaning makers (scholars, politicians, policy makers, et al.). In a world stripped of the transcendent, there is only a world of bare facts that don't explain themselves. The medieval notion of knowledge as given, as gift, *donum*, is replaced by data, the material world of mere facts. In terms of intellectual history, Pontynen associates qualitative knowledge with Plato, St. Augustine, and St. Anselm, while the quantitative paradigm is associated with Peter Abelard, Kant, Heidegger, Derrida, and numerous others in modernity.

*Cultural Renewal* is particularly insightful in articulating the consequences of our entirely quantitative approach to knowledge and culture. An obvious consequence of the dominance of the quantitative is that the liberal and fine arts have become largely unnecessary, irrelevant. If knowledge isn't about wisdom but facts, then the liberal arts are disciplines without objects, as Pontynen observes. What fills the educational vacuum left by the liberal arts? The social sciences, the empirical and factual study of humanity and society. Higher education has moved toward "a relentless and trivial sociologizing of all fields knowledge."

We no longer turn to humanists steeped in perennial wisdom for guidance; the new authorities are the social and biological scientists who quantifiably determine what we do, and shepherd us along with the authoritative weight of their data. As Pontynen observes, "Culture is not the record of what we ought to do; it is [now] the record of what we commonly do, as revealed by factual

evidence.” The inevitable consequence of the ascendancy of the quantitative is a society dominated by data-driven specialists. Today the most powerful are those adept at “the skillful manipulation of data, people, and things.” The power in education, business, government, and policy is wielded by those manipulating the broadest range of facts.

Pontynen points out the perverse irony of this new culture model: while vested in the authority of facts, the specialist is both completely incomprehensible to the common man, yet slavishly obeyed by him. This creates a new *mysterium*, though one not religious in character: “a vast quantity of specialized data is manipulated by specialists and applied by technocratic bureaucracies. The scientist and the technocratic bureaucrat alienate the public via a coercive *mysterium* of expertise.”

Another insight in *Cultural Renewal* is Pontynen’s argument that the violence of quantitative culture is driven by what he calls an unanalyzable “inner necessity” in nature and humanity. If facts simply exist without God, context, or cause, then we observe them in the world, and they simply must be what they are. Who is to say they should be otherwise? Human perception of facts is, for the individual and groups, relational; they are conditioned by our perspectives, our sentiments, our desires.

At the level of culture, human action simply becomes a compulsion to realize our urges, what Pontynen labels “inner necessity.” He observes that postmodern culture is the “subjectively willful pursuit of experiential perfections. That pursuit centers on self-expression and self-realization, and it is the realization of our *inner necessity* that constitutes being if not civilized, then at least self-righteously authentic.” The only option a merely fact-populated universe leaves us is the need to realize who we are, as individu-

als, groups, or entire societies, and this sense of self-realization takes on the character of an irrefutable inner necessity.

It is an urge so powerful it trumps any theological teaching, moral precept, state law, or social policy. The tyranny of inner necessity has created true horrors in the modern era: Pontynen ties movements of genocide and racist eugenics in the modern West to a desire for a “social ecology,” an obsession with social rather than natural environmental purity. Such pathological social ecologies are simply manifestations of inner necessity at the level of an entire society or culture.

As a scholar of art history, Pontynen pays particular attention to the fine arts in *Cultural Renewal*, particularly the evolutions of modern art history. He emphasizes that not only has the concept of “aesthetics” dominated art history; it has dominated culture at large. Aesthetics, a term coined by the German Enlightenment philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, denotes human sensation, perception, and feeling. Aesthetics, in this sense, renders art appreciation and history a mere matter of taste. He cites the now largely forgotten art critic Ananda Coomaraswamy, who insists “[art] is an intellectual, not a physical virtue,” in the qualitative tradition. It is about analogously representing ideal Beauty. Yet the turn toward aesthetics is a quantitative turn toward how art makes us feel, how it impacts our material senses. Art then becomes a matter of taste, of which, as the old Latin adage implies, there is no dispute (*de gustibus non est disputandum*). Each person is justified in his own tastes. As goes art, so goes culture at large. Human culture and our “lifestyles” are now a mere matter of taste, and when moral and lifestyle “tastes” collide, violence ensues.

Headley and Pontynen both have considerable faith in the West’s ability to regenerate itself. Headley reminds us that secularism has

a vital link to the Christian heritage of Europe and that exploring the space of the secular needn't be an outright rejection of Christianity. Pontynen's advice for restoring the liberal and fine arts is what he calls a return to quantitative wisdom-seeking traditions,

which allow us to transcend the madness of the merely quantitative worldview. Although offering differing perspectives, both authors point repeatedly to the perennial adaptability and persistent endurance of the Western commitment to truth and order. †

## TWO WOMEN: ONE ART

Randall Ivey

*The Life and Death of Poetry* by Kelly Cherry (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2013)

*Eldest Daughter* by Ava Leavell Haymon (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2013)

When one begins a review of any contemporary book of poetry, one is always tempted to commence his assessment with a general diatribe against the current state of the art form, its shapelessness, its obsession with ephemera, and its general esoterica. Luckily, the work of both Kelly Cherry and Ava Leavell Haymon negates such a tendency. They are among the true individuals of American poetry in that they manage, mostly, to steer clear of the alienating trends of so much contemporary verse. They have a reverence for traditional poetic form and are able to employ those forms in fresh and creative ways. They write personally but not to the point of grotesqueness. They know that poetry is the art of suggestion and that what is left out of a poem is just as important as what is left in. They are able

to embrace and write lucidly about subjects that have always mattered and always will—family, spirituality, and the use of language itself, among others.

Kelly Cherry is the author of more than thirty books in her decades-long writing career. Among these are novels, memoirs, criticism, chapbooks, poetry collections, and even translations (a subject she addresses in her current book). *The Life and Death of Poetry* is her most recent poetry compendium and in some ways can serve as her testament as a poet, since its chief concern is the use of language.

The book is divided into three sections: "Learning the Language," "Welsh Table Talk," and "What the Poet Wishes to Say," all preceded by a quotation from C.S. Lewis: "...Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought." This is a theme that clearly dominates the book—the idea of the inextricability of man and language, one creating the other, the second defining the first. The poems in

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