FORUM I
The Multicultural Curriculum: Why Jews Are Concerned

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At first glance, it would appear unusual that the organized Jewish community has a deep interest in the curricula of American universities. Of all the challenges on the international and domestic scenes facing contemporary Jewry, whether Erasmus is taught in a "great books" class would not seem to rank high among them.

Yet, American Jewry is genuinely troubled by trends in the university, and specifically by debates over the canon; that is, the reading list of "great books" that are supposed to form the basis of the college literary curriculum and, more broadly, an educated person's fund of knowledge. Traditionally, the canon focused on the classics of Western civilization. Whether it needs to be broadened to reflect the contributions of other cultures, and to what degree, has become a matter of urgent and often tense debate, not least among America's Jews.

American Jews have a keen interest in the viability of the nation's universities. The quality of American Jewish life is closely connected to the experience of higher education. Over 90% of college-aged American Jews currently attend undergraduate programs; over 60% receive professional credentials from graduate institutions. Without the university, the economic success, social and political involvement, and intellectual standing of American Jewry would be inconceivable.

For these reasons, American Jews have ranked among the most loyal and generous supporters of the university. Private and corporate donations and participation in alumni campaigns by Jews are an important part of the funding base of higher education. Governmental grants for scholarship, research, and teaching have always found strong support within the Jewish community. At the most basic level, Jews are prominent among the sector of the American public that fundamentally believes that higher education is a critical factor in the overall health of American society.

It should be a matter of serious concern, then, when American Jews begin asking hard questions about university trends. The beginnings of a process of alienation from the university are evident among some sectors of the Jewish community. In part, this alienation is caused by reports of anti-Semitism and anti-Israel ideologies, which are said to be gaining ground on various campuses. Yet, it also stems from concerns about curricular trends that seem to indicate that core values and knowledge, which American Jews regard as vital for both their own viability and that of the larger society, are under attack.

This worry does not arise from direct experience or original research on academic trends. It derives, rather, from leading articles in highly respected and, among American Jews, widely read journals, such as the *New Republic* (February 28, 1991), the *Atlantic* (March 1991), and *Harper's* (December 1991), as well as periodic feature stories in such newspapers as the *New York Times*. Through these media, scholars and social commentators worried about current curricular trends have made a powerful case. Defenders of teaching methods and materials now in place have not projected their views as clearly to the nonuniversity reading public, either because these vehicles are not open to them or because they have not taken an equal ini-

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tiative to ensure a broad hearing for their views.

Yet, the apprehension of American Jews about university life should not be attributed solely to skilled efforts of media manipulation. It stems from a genuine and legitimate concern that needs to be addressed in open dialogue with university leaders. To fully understand Jewish attitudes, attention must be given to the context in which this issue arises, the specific threats discerned in curriculum debates, the potential practical consequences of directions in teaching, and effective ways to address and allay these concerns.

CONTEXT FOR THE MULTICULTURALISM DEBATES: CONCERN WITH ANTI-SEMITISM

Jews in the contemporary United States are in a high state of anxiety.

That fact is often difficult for groups with whom we meet to accept. In our dialogues with blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and white ethnics, there exists an initial strong dose of skepticism that a community as successful and powerful as American Jews could actually feel threatened. Yet, the feeling of threat is real, and any constructive conversation with the Jewish community must begin with this fact.

Surveys show that fully three-quarters of American Jews now consider anti-Semitism to be a serious national problem. This figure is an increase from a level of about 50% a half-decade ago.

Concern with anti-Semitism arises from three sources. First, individual bigots still exert influence over a disturbing number of Americans. Although right-wing extremism has been dampened to some degree by concerted law enforcement efforts, the David Duke phenomenon indicates that it has hardly run its course. A radical anti-Semitism has emerged from a segment of the black community, as exemplified by Louis Farrakhan and Al Sharpton. These men have appeared on college campuses with increasing frequency. In addition, anti-Semitism has found its way into some of the major institutions of American society. Anti-Jewish statements are heard with increasing frequency in the mass media, especially in one of its fastest growing subfields, talk radio. There have also been a disturbing number of attacks on Jewish candidates in local elections, either because voters are urged to "put a Christian in office" or because some disloyalty is perceived in staunch support for Israel. This concern for anti-Semitism in major institutions is heightened by widespread reports of physical and verbal attacks on Jews on university campuses, as well as the discomfort of Jewish students at hearing their support for Israel characterized as "imperialist" or "racist" and thereby not receiving a serious hearing.

Third, these first two trends cause real worry for the future of Jewish security in the United States. The signal achievement of Jewish communal relations since World War II has been to make anti-Semitism a highly illegitimate public position in American life. Anti-Semitism has not been eradicated, but it has been contained; public expression of it disqualifies one from mainstream leadership in this society. Yet, the combined effect of recent greater attention to prominent bigots, such as David Duke and Al Sharpton, and the emergence of anti-Semitism in major American institutions has been to threaten to break down this taboo. Anti-Semitism may become a viable public presence, with unpredictable consequences for the future of American Jewry.

This concern with anti-Semitism has two subtle but nonetheless important consequences for the debate on multiculturalism on the campus. It is not that anyone is seriously charging that multiculturalism, except in extreme forms, such as Leonard Jeffries' version of Afrocentrism, is itself an anti-Semitic movement. Rather, apprehension over anti-Semitism provides a context for the debate on multiculturalism. Jews are not entering this field in the position of secure and objective observers

whose major goal is to sort through competing claims in a calm and detached fashion. Rather, they are witnessing a confused and often bitter battle on a key facet of university life that touches on competing claims of various cultures from the vantage point of one culture that feels under attack. The Jewish community believes it has real stakes in the evolution of current trends on campus and is uncertain and apprehensive about their outcome. The whole debate recalls earlier periods of Jewish history when narrow group-based ideologies hurt Jewish interests.

In this apprehension, Jews are hardly unique. Blacks, Hispanics, women's groups, gays, even white men, and defenders of the traditional curriculum all feel beleaguered and under attack. In debates on the canon, each group perceives a potential loss in public recognition of the worth of its values and culture; each also believes that it possesses truths and has produced great works that ought to find recognition in university teaching. The university, in short, has become an important arbiter of competing claims for legitimacy in a diverse American society. This academic debate is by no means "academic" in the old sense of being detached from struggles in the everyday world; it has inescapably become a critical site for those struggles.

Second, and more fundamental, overcoming any of these group apprehensions, which are all grounded in convincing evidence of prejudice against Jews, blacks, women, and others, requires a belief in a general and overriding set of values to which all people can subscribe. An intellectual community that respects all groups within it must place a high value on tolerance and respect for the ethnic, racial, and gender groups that comprise it, as well as for individuals who choose not to identify with any group. Overcoming racism, anti-Semitism, or any bigotry or, more positively, promoting pluralism requires acceptance of the notion that all communities share a dedication to common values that ensure the humanity and worth of each group. This common core of values is essential for any pluralistic society, including the university. Whether this common core exists is at the very heart of the campus debate on multiculturalism.

TWO COMPETING APPROACHES TO MULTICULTURALISM

As noted, most Jewish leaders in the United States, as is true of influential members of other social and ethnic groups, have not been direct participants in the university debate over the canon or the multicultural curriculum. The issue has been framed for each of these communities by the press. As the problem comes through to the educated public, it seems to provide a stark choice between two competing views of multiculturalism and curriculum development that offer very different prospects for the concept of pluralism in America.

One view seems to challenge the notion that people of various classes, ethnicities, races, genders, or sexual orientations have anything meaningful to say to each other. This argument begins with an attack on the traditional canon of great books of Western civilization taught for years at many universities. It charges that this canon narrows the hugely diverse human experience to the writings of mostly privileged-class white men. Proponents of this view are not content, however, with seeking to broaden the literature to be read. They argue that the traditional great books do not speak to the experience of blacks, women, and other groups. In turn, the works of these groups cannot be fairly evaluated by the mostly white, male professoriate because these scholars cannot fully relate to the literatures of minorities and women. Each race, class, gender, and the like needs its own curriculum, indeed its own department or separate studies center, where its works can be understood and appreciated by the only group that can in fact relate meaningfully to them—members of these closed communities. In this way, trends toward separation in the

larger society become transferred to the campus.

This movement is given intellectual weight by a direct challenge to the "greatness" of great books in the traditional canon. This analysis views these works not as they have been historically taught as exemplars of high achievement transcending the time and place when and where they were written, but rather as "texts" that reflect essentially the social, class, gender, and other characteristics of their authors. Thus, John Milton tells us less about broad human aspirations and failings than about the historically-bound cultural assumptions of male upper-class Protestantism in seventeenth-century England. Moreover, the entire canon reflects essentially the values of its compilers, largely a privileged professoriate who held sway at the turn of the present century.

It is impossible, of course, to understand any literature absent the historical context in which it is written. Shakespeare would be incomprehensible without knowledge of his contemporary political and social milieu, as would Plato without familiarity with ancient Greece. The question is whether their context suffices to explain them fully. Defenders of any form of a canon of great books assume that, even allowing for contextual analysis, there exists in these works wisdom and beauty that transcend the time and place of their authorship. No matter when they were written, they speak to us today.

This potential to transcend the bounds of ethnicity, race, gender, time, and place is critical to defending the idea of pluralism and to combating the bigotry that now threatens our society. If our ability to understand and appreciate significant literature is limited to the works our own group produces, we are destined to live our meaningful lives in separate compartments designated by our biological traits. This literary separatism provides a strong justification for social separatism. It destroys the notion of common values that we all share and to which each of our cultures contributes. If this idea is gaining support on the campus, if it becomes part of the intellectual legacy we are imparting to young minds, as journalistic accounts say it is, then Jews and other groups who see their security as tied to pluralism indeed have much about which to worry.

There is another definition of multiculturalism, however, which most Jews and supporters of pluralism would readily endorse. This view accepts the idea of a canon of great books from which all can learn, but acknowledges that it was too narrowly conceived in its traditional form. This canon was devised by men of a particular race, class, and gender and excludes many important works by women, blacks, and other ethnic groups and religions that would greatly enlighten anyone who reads them. Proponents of this view seek to expand the canon, rather than challenge its basic legitimacy.

This second definition of multiculturalism promotes the idea of pluralism, rather than replaces it. It assumes that all cultures have something to teach each other and that various literatures can be understood and appreciated by different groups. Men can expand their intellectual and experiential horizons by reading women, whites by reading blacks, Jews and Christians by reading Buddhists, and everyone by reading the great Greek philosophers.

This concept assumes a common set of values to which all groups can contribute. It further assumes that all cultures can provide pathways to the realization of common values and mutual appreciation. It readily accepts the worth and importance of various traditions, but believes that members of each can learn and grow by studying the others.

This approach does not assume that various cultures are redundant. It would be a mistake to argue that, since we hold values in common that we reach by the study of any culture, we only have to study one or two to realize the values that unite us all. Each culture grows out of a set of unique experiences that provide an irreplaceable

perspective on human experience. We become wiser and acquire enhanced understanding the more traditions we study. This is why the canon should strive to be as inclusive as possible. The more racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and other experience it covers, the better grasp we will have of the world. This approach assumes that cultures can enrich each other, that people from one background can learn from the great works of another. For this learning to take place, there must exist common values and a mutual respect between traditions in dialogue. It requires, in short, a democratic and inclusive pluralism.

The difference between these two different approaches to multiculturalism can be illustrated by calls to add the works of Toni Morrison, a black female author, to the list of books in basic literature courses. This addition can be justified in two ways. It might be argued that blacks and women cannot relate to the works now in the canon because they are culturally distant from them. It would then be required to add such authors as Morrison so that minority and female students will have access to segments of the curriculum to which they can relate uniquely. This is the argument for exclusive multiculturalism. Or, one can insist that Morrison be added because her absence would weaken the curriculum for all students since all could learn and benefit from great works that are rooted in the black and female experience of their author but that transcend this context in a way that teaches much to people of all races and genders. This is the argument for pluralistic multiculturalism.

The idea of pluralistic multiculturalism presents practical problems that do not exist either in defenses of the traditional canon or in notions of exclusive multiculturalism. This challenge centers on choosing the books to be included in the basic curriculum. In the traditional canon, these works are already selected; they have been taught for years as examplars of "great" literature of Western civilization. In exclusive multiculturalism, the choice of meaningful works is limited to books of one's own ethnicity, race, or gender. In pluralistic multiculturalism, by contrast, the list of books to be read is potentially endless and overwhelming. If one assumes that students of any description can grow by reading the great literature of any period, ethnic, or gender origin, teachers are left with an almost infinite range of works from which to choose. Constructing a canon becomes a constant process of evaluating and reconfiguring a curriculum that not only encompasses the traditional canon but also reaches out to incorporate significant literatures beyond it. Yet, this process of growth and debate over what enriches us all is precisely what university life should seek to achieve. This evaluation creates an ongoing discussion over the practical meaning of a pluralistic curriculum and thus forms an important facet of pluralism in the larger society.

Among the difficulties of following the debate over exclusive and pluralistic multiculturalism is that the same curricular and institutional innovations can support either approach, depending on how they are conceptualized and implemented. For example, the establishment of special departments or centers of black, Jewish, women, or Asian studies on campus can further the aims of either school of thought. If the assumption behind these special departments is that only the group for which they are being formed can fully understand, set standards for scholarship, and produce new work on their particular ethnic or gender literature, and if students they seek to attract are primarily from their own group, these centers further the aims of exclusive multiculturalism. If, on the other hand, these centers offer their work to be judged by the standards of broad university scholarship, seek to specialize in their fields as examples of great literatures open to all, and recruit a broad range of students, they strengthen the concept of pluralistic multiculturalism. It is not the existence of the centers themselves, but rather the assumptions behind

their founding that determine their impact.

Indeed, special academic centers may be required to foster the growth of ethnic scholarship available to the broad university community. It may be that initially work based on particular ethnic, racial, or gender literatures is shunned by academic establishments because it is innovative and unfamiliar to traditional scholarship. This work may need the nurturing of special centers to grow and to demonstrate that the new field indeed offers literature and scholarship that are the equal of other fields and that merit inclusion in discussion of canon development. What is important is the aim of the scholarship. Does it seek to demonstrate its potential worth to the entire community of scholars and students, or does it assume relevance to only a circumscribed subset based on physical characteristics? Is it integrated into the overall university, or is it physically and academically isolated from it?

The actual reading lists taught currently in university courses may also be an inaccurate guide to the assumptions behind selection of books for literature courses. It is possible, for example, that nineteenth-century American literature courses still focus primarily on such authors as Melville, Thoreau, and Emerson. This focus would seem to indicate a continuation of the traditional canon. Yet, how these works are taught is another important consideration. Herman Melville, for example, can be read as wrestling with universal issues, such as ambition, achievement, and hubris, or be seen as a manifestation of male modes of thought in nineteenth-century America. Or, he could be evaluated as both, as needed to be understood in both his historical, gender, and class context and in terms of his insights on the human experience. How a work is taught is as critical as what is taught, although the latter question seems to dominate debates on the canon.

How curricula are described can also obscure their real intent or impact. Yet, exclusiveness is too often the effect of new curricula. A few years ago, for example, a committee appointed by the New York State Department of Education produced a "Curriculum of Inclusion" for elementary and secondary schools. If implemented, its recommendations, which stressed teaching about group conflicts and particularities, would have produced the opposite of the goal in its title. The document was a prototype of teaching plans that would fragment the population by ethnic and racial traits and produce division, rather than mutual understanding and pluralism. The word "inclusion" is no magic potion by itself; to mouth the phrase does not make it real. It is critical to evaluate the true effects of course curricula, not merely their stated goals.

Are these concerns real, or are they the result of press reports that have made up a concept of exclusive multiculturalism that does not exist, or exists only in minor examples on campus? Have the media exaggerated a problem that is not all that threatening? Outside observers see some real threats in the separatist programs of several black studies departments and Jewish, women's, and other special programs; in some of the attacks on the canon; in the deconstructionist movement in literary criticism; and in critical legal studies in law school. Unless these movements are shown to be peripheral, observers will discern ample reason to worry about them.

The canon, in short, involves issues that resonate far beyond literature classes or the university itself. Questions of its creation and evolution touch on how we define pluralism in the contemporary United States. That is why this debate is so critical to the Jewish and other communities outside university life.

SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CANON DEBATE

It may come as a surprise to academicians who consider themselves "scholars with their books" to learn that their deliberations carry such weight on broad social questions. Yet,

the canon debate has important social implications, as two examples below illustrate.

The first occurred when I was a graduate student at Columbia in the early 1970s. A group of law professors, historians, and students became appalled at the horrible conditions at the Willowbrook Mental Hospital on Staten Island where patients were humiliated and abused and sometimes found by investigators to sit for hours in their own feces, to suffer beatings by the staff, and to endure chronic and cruel neglect. This group succeeded in closing down Willowbrook. Yet, their intellectual construct assumed that the fundamental problem was the institution, not the type of care delivered to the patients themselves. They believed that mental illness was a socially constructed phenomenon that had no relation to reality. Shutting the mental hospital would free the patients to be their own autonomous selves, no longer subject to the oppression or constraints imposed by a culturally dominant mental health hierarchy. Of course, closing down Willowbrook did not achieve that anticipated effect. Patients were essentially thrown out onto the streets where they continue to live horrible lives with no social supports. The concept of a caring society was not acceptable to the legal and scholarly team that closed Willowbrook since they considered professional expertise, by definition, to be oppressive. No alternative care program for this group was devised, since none was considered needed. The victims were the patients, who were pawns in a game that exchanged one version of hell for another.

The intellectual inspiration for the Willowbrook closure team was Michel Foucault (1973) whose theories also underlie much of the challenge to the idea of the canon. Foucault taught, or at least the legal team interpreted his teachings, that mental health is not reality but a definition imposed on the weak by the socially strong. Society at large can do no good; it can only force its version, usually oppressive, of order on other classes. Positive policy is not possible; one can only carry out negative, nihilistic actions such as the closing of Willowbrook. Alternative measures of care would only impose power in another guise.

There are direct parallels between the neglect of the Willowbrook population and exclusive multicultural approaches to the curriculum. Each assumes that people are caught up in the gender, class, racial, and ethnic groups to which they are born and can find no meaningful relationship with individuals from other origins. Each negates the concept of a set of overall values that unite the society to which each culture contributes. Exclusive multiculturalism cuts groups off from each other by rendering impossible the concept that they can share common values and enhance each other's concept of humanity. The Willowbrook team assumed that the solution to the real problems of the mental hospital was to free the patients from professional help, rather than considering the possibility that patients and professionals could share common values and concern that would result in the devising of a humane policy for a population in great need. In this way, both movements deny the vision of a society sharing aspirations and values that are enhanced by respect and open communication among its various groups.

The point of this illustration is that the values expressed in the multicultural debate have real consequences in the larger, non-university society. An assumption that different cultures cannot understand or relate to each other promotes the message that they cannot work together on policy or forge and achieve a common vision. Conversely, a concept of pluralistic multiculturalism that encourages the sharing of perspectives across genders, classes, and ethnic identities promotes the ideal of coalitional work on political and social issues. This is one reason that the university debate has generated such interest beyond the campus.

A second illustration recalls the concern with which this article began. American

society is struggling to come to grips with a burgeoning diversity, which offers great opportunities for growth, but also real dangers of fragmentation and expression of bigotry. The Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings illustrated the explosive and confused nature of racial and sexual identity in the United States. The multiculturalism debate has a direct bearing on the evolution of these issues.

Exclusive multiculturalism denies the possibility of cultural sharing and mutual growth. It isolates groups into separate compartments, excluding the possibility of joint endeavor. Transmitted to the level of society, these assumptions negate the possibility of intergroup understanding, shared interest, and powerful coalitions. Relations between groups become a matter of negotiation between autonomous entities, rather than mutual appreciation and synergistic action.

It is hard to see how this set of values can do much to alleviate hatred and bigotry in America. It can create "rules-of-the-game" for negotiation among autonomous groups, but it can hardly hold out the prospect of shared values and positive pluralism that can argue that group hate is wrong. It is essentially separation in theory that will promote separation in fact.

Pluralistic multiculturalism, on the other hand, offers real hope for a society struggling to understand, treat fairly, and build positive relations among its many groups. In its vision, groups are proud of their literary achievements and see in them bridges to other communities. It fundamentally believes in mutual understanding and assumes that various cultures share values sufficiently to engage in deep and honest exchange.

It is this vision that offers hope for countering the bigotry that is expressed in anti-Semitism, racism, misogyny, and other social pathologies. It will not, of course, eliminate hatred, but it offers a powerful alternative vision of mutual understanding and values to which society can positively adhere. The viability of this vision is very much at stake in the campus multicultural debate.

Current debates on the curriculum are now having real consequences beyond the university. The battle over the books is directly affecting the nature of American life. Separatists in various racial and ethnic communities have seized on the canon issue as a means of demonstrating the "exclusionary nature" of mainstream society and the "necessity" for narrow community consciousness. Efforts to combat anti-Semitism and bigotry have been rendered more difficult by the notion, attributed to critics of the traditional curriculum, that defending liberal values means oppression of minorities. The debate in the academy, in short, has become part of the larger debate over the social and political future of the United States.

Academicians cannot respond to this challenge simply by affirming pluralistic multiculturalism and claiming that exclusionist or separatist curricula are minor or peripheral forces on campus. This debate has become an integral factor in struggles to define broad pluralism in the United States. Scholars now championing multiculturalism have an obligation to define it precisely and to convey its values and social implications to a confused public. They have yet to reach out beyond the university, and their failure to do so explains in part the alienation from higher education that many Americans are now feeling.

A key problem is that academics and groups outside the university rarely meet. In my experience Jewish discussions of this problem usually take place within the Jewish community, with group members telling each other how bad it is "out there." It also appears, at least to an outsider, that the university community is defensive about this concern and is not communicating with the broader society about its apprehensions. Certainly, defenders of pluralistic multiculturalism have not taken nearly the same initiative as their critics in influencing the general public.

It is time for an initiative of mutual

discussion. Groups, such as the Jewish community, which are apprehensive about campus trends, and scholars writing and developing multicultural curricula need to meet to share concerns and learn more about each other. Out of these deliberations could grow a greater understanding of the essence, goals, and methods of multiculturalism and a strategy for promoting these insights within the academy and among the general public. This initiative itself might be a positive step in intercultural understanding.

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