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The Decline of Faith
World History On-Line
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"History is not over," according to the first line of Benjamin Barber's Jihad vs. McWorld (©1995). In my context, World History On-line is not over, nor will it be over at the end of Winter Trimester. Although the course was disappointing in some aspects, partly due to lack of personal effort and ability and partly due to limitations of the course, the curriculum's deviations from my understanding of the concept of world history have given me new insights that I might never have reached had we not strayed from strict adherence to world history topics.

World history, as I have come to understand it, is a methodology involving the study of regional histories (small scale) in terms of global trends and continuities (large scale). Within this context, we convincingly revealed, described, and analyzed the global trend of increased interaction between the world's peoples. I am reasonably sure that the study of this trend was chosen not arbitrarily, but with the intent that it be applied to the second half of the title of the course, On-Line.

Unfortunately, the course failed to live up to the high expectations that I had for it coming out of Science and Human Values. Before the year began, I received a stack of books ranging from such then-abhorrent titles as Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation to the favorite Jurassic Park. I had very little faith that a meaningful course could be molded from such incompatible media. However, the course was an incredible but circumstantial success, which set impossibly high standards for World History On-Line to live up to.

This is not to say that World History has been a failure, simply that it failed to live up to my expectations. In retrospect, the course seemed doomed from the day of the lunchtime trip to Books & Company to choose the literature. For indeterminate reasons, the class did not end up

with cutting edge material, again judged from the context of Science and Human Values, despite the occurrence of the seemingly impossible event of a class consensus on a list of three books. Similar failure of the technology of the school to provide adequate access to Internet facilities, and in fact the failure of the Internet itself as a top-notch resource further doomed the course to fall short of my expectations.

These limitations undoubtedly contributed my sense of deviation from traditional world history methodology. Often the topic of ethnic notions distracted the discussion or preempted world history entirely. The material resources of the class, because of the lack of a common anthology of books, were limited to excerpts from Chapter 13 and the research that classmates accomplished on the Internet and in world history journals. Further, the same lack of syllabus that made Science and Human Values a success contributed the feeling of indirection of World History On-Line. Science and Human Values had a dynamic conversation with conflicting viewpoints, but the relative inexperience of the class with world history concepts and the fairly straightforward material did not allow for nearly as much debate or discussion as did Science and Human Values. Given the lack of material, and the relative 'normal science' content of what we did have, it is not surprising that the conversation often drifted from what I saw as world history, eventually leading to my frustration with the course.

Perhaps with more effort on my part to discover relevant topics and material for discussion I would not have become frustrated with the direction that the course was taking. But I suspect that not I nor the rest of the class had the world history tools or understanding of its methodology to find these documents when we needed to find them. In retrospect, always clearer than foresight, this catch-22, the inability to discover the material which would teach us the methodology to discover the material, was another factor in the futility of the course. Since we already had the materials, Science and Human values did not require the methodology to learn the methodology, simply the will to understand it.

Furthermore, when Netscape was not crashing due to Internet traffic, it was discovered that cutting edge world history was not even available for our access, due to intellectual property

rights and economic considerations. The Internet remains a primarily business-oriented phenomena. Someone has to pay to maintain an Internet site and it is still not economically viable to put cutting edge material on the Net when it can be sold. In fact, even when historians were contacted, they did not respond via the Internet using cheap and virtually instantaneous E-Mail messages, they made telephone calls and sent snail-mail packages containing pages of printed material and accompanying letters, both expensive and time-consuming forms of communication. One professor even expressed his belief that there is no cutting edge research on the Internet, it exists only at universities. Although the existence of the Internet supports the thesis that the world is characterized by increasing interaction between its peoples, my experience with the Internet leads me to believe that the quality of this interaction is no better than the armed conflicts and persecution that has characterized past interaction between conflicting ideologies.

Although these justifications for the futility of the course may be no more than excuses and rationalizations, the results are evident. World History On-Line has not left me with an overwhelming understanding of world history concepts within the context that I understood world history or a greatly improved grasp of its methodology. However, when looked at from a different perspective, perhaps I was asking too much of world history. I expected an understanding of conflict such as that between the PLO and Israelites, or the war in Bosnia, and from that understanding I had hoped to see a solution, not wanting to believe that some of the world's problems are unsolvable. I did begin to grasp the complexity of the two situations, but did not gain the satisfaction of discovering a potential solution. In fact, it seems that these conflicts are nearly impossible to avoid.

However, as the discussion turned to political spectrums and public philosophies of born-again liberals, a new perspective on world history convinced me that I had in fact learned things that I could apply to my life even after the end of winter trimester. World history is not about the abstract, virtually-meaningless-because-of-its-size concept of the global village, but a person's own individual world, his context of existence that is meant to be changed by studying

world history. It is foolish to believe that a vast, infinitely complex organism as the human condition can be changed significantly on its own scale. It can, however, be changed on an individual level, and to some extent, even a regional level.

But even the possibility of understanding the influence of world history on a regional level would have given me no satisfaction, again given the context of Science and Human Values. I expected World History On-Line to give me the sense of an improved understanding of my own life from the material learned in the course. Viewed in terms of a personal perspective, World History On-Line does this for me.

As the conversation strayed to ethnic notions, I had become irritated with the apparent tangential nature of the discussion. Further deviations to Political Correctness soon gave me the feeling that the course had been reduced to mental masturbation, intellectualizing for the sake of being intellectual. As the concept of ethnic notions was repainted as an ideological filter itself, I began to question the integrity of my own beliefs in terms of my dealings with otherness. As it was proven that the gangsta rapper really existed and the stereotypical image of the homosexual is actually copied by real people, I wondered if being steeped in PC and ethnic notions rhetoric had in fact adversely affected the relationships in my life that the knowledge was supposed to help improve.

Even now I wonder if my new interpretation of world history as a personal tool is just another ethnic notions filter which distorts the reality of the true applications of world history. But I also wonder if that matters. If using the concepts in this way truly improves the quality of individual lives, that should certainly outweigh the consequences of distorting world history into a personal application with an intellectual filter. Similarly, if ethnic notions improve the way Juniors interact with otherness, what is the use of intellectualizing (masturbating) about the amorality of shaping ideologies?

During a sermon on the political spectrum and the validity of morality as intellectual fashion, I finally came to terms with my perspective of world history. Angry with the apparent indirection of the ideas in terms of world world history, I put them in terms of personal world

history and I finally felt like I was getting something from the course. It is useless to generalize about the integrity of values and still make no connections between them and one's own life. Granted, it may seem obvious that applying these concepts on a personal level was the intent of discussing them in the first place, yet until then I was still trying to find world world history relevance. At this point I had finally satiated my desire for Science and Human Values paradigm shift, even though I possibly distorted the reality to achieve that end. In the same way that Science and Human Values has not ended, I believe World History On-Line will continue to affect me even after it has ended.

Unfortunately, I have become aware that we only scratched the surface of the world history dialogue. Given three trimesters, perhaps a satisfying understanding of world history could be reached, but I don't know if anyone has the patience to continue digging on-line for history. Reading Jihad vs. McWorld has at least clarified for me our discussion of the increasing interaction between the world's peoples and the conflicts inherent in conflicting ideologies.

According to Benjamin Barber, the patterns of increased interaction and conflict between ideologies are part of "two eternities of race and soul". Ideological conflict stems from race, a force driving toward a tribal past. Increased interaction is a result of soul, a force driving toward the anticipated future. Barber labels these forces Jihad, faith against narrowly conceived tribal faith, and McWorld, glimmering McDonald's, MTV, and Macintosh.

Instead of conflict resulting from increased interaction, Barber argues that Jihad and McWorld are antithetical forces of change working to destroy each other and at the same time working together to destroy democracy and civil liberty. Jihad threatens to eliminate nations from the world game leaving only thousands of tribes while McWorld transcends governments and diminishes their power.

Barber suggests that Jihad is uncontrollable by any government measure, asking the rhetorical question "Can advertising divert warriors of blood from the genocide required by their ancient grievances?" Jihad is the essence of man, seeking animalistic revenge despite claims of intelligence and rational thought. This situation demonstrates the relevance of the claim that

morals are invalid if they do not hold up in uncomfortable situations, but instead give way to instinctual survival behaviors. Barber also asserts that "forced into incessant contact, postmodern nations cannot sequester their idiosyncrasies," a testimony to the instability of peace between conflicting ideologies.

McWorld is also independent of government actions because, "as a product of a host of individual choices or singular corporate acts, markets offer no collective responsibility." McWorld is a self-perpetuating system because it creates the cultural values necessary to material consumption. As progress due to McWorld advances communications between consumer and itself, the resulting increased knowledge of consumer habits leads to increased shaping of those habits to suit capitalist interest. According to Rousseau, technology compounds human needs instead of gratifying them. The desire for progress and advancement stems from the same enlightenment ideals as democracy, yet McWorld is an active destroyer of democratic civil liberties. Barber argues that the enlightenment ideal of progress as means of happiness must be dealt with in order to control McWorld, but McWorld must be under control to eliminate this enlightenment ideal, a seemingly impossible task.

Barber paints the two forces of Jihad and McWorld as unstoppable trends which will eventually destroy global democracy. He argues that McWorld is a stronger force of change because it controls the power (money), but McWorld and Jihad are inescapably linked. Barber shows that nearly 90% of the energy production and energy resources are dependent on nations in which forces of Jihad have a strong to moderate influence on the stability of that nation. Further, those nations with the strongest economies are the same nations with the most fragile independence. In the event of Jihad, those countries with the greatest prosperity in McWorld will be the first victims because of their dependence on foreign markets. Barber also suggests that Jihad will take place via McWorld. Already there are Neo-Nazi and CyberMuslim forums on the Internet.

With the advent of McWorld and Jihad, democracy and civil liberties face serious threats. McWorld devalues the currency of democracy, as voting becomes an instantaneous,

unconsidered, global event. Campaigns are reduced to twenty second MTV flashes of color and light, attempting to appeal to the power of McWorld, instead of McWorld acknowledging the sovereignty of national government. McWorld blurs national identity and breeds ambivalence, as American workers are happy with the lowering of prices on goods but complain about losing the jobs to cheap labor Mexico which allows the price to be lowered. Jihad breeds disunity, undermining the authority of democracy and reducing pluralistic considerations to a farce. Barely 2% of the world's nations have homogenous populations, leaving the remaining nations to be fragmented by Jihad into countless clans.

If the forces of Jihad and McWorld are unstoppable, as Barber asserts, then the downfall of current democracy is inevitable. He suggests that a new democracy be created to govern the activities of Jihad and McWorld, not pieced together from constitutions and Marxist doctrine, but original, like the totally new government created in the United States to regulate a diverse and flourishing economy and population.

In Barber's terms, the Internet becomes a symbol of destruction and fear and pluralistic society signifies inevitable regression into the past. McWorld is breeding its new generation of idiots in the political spectrum of intellectual fashion on MTV and consumerism. Although the economic bounties promised by McWorld promise to give fashionable morality increased comfort and therefore strength, Jihad is simultaneously destroying that safety as increased interaction makes it more difficult to avoid conflicting ideologies.

What does this mean when world world history is viewed in terms of personal world history? It means a very real fear of the Internet and the increased dependence of society on technology. It means increased skepticism of the institution of democracy since it allows capitalist exploitation. But most of all, it means that every day I am more seriously considering moving to Ladakh.