

## Response to Nicholas Wolterstorff's "Doing is Not Everything"<sup>1</sup>

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I am honored to have the opportunity to respond to someone I respect and admire as much as I respect and admire Nicholas Wolterstorff. Having said that, I want to challenge Nick on one fundamental point. Nick is correct in suggesting that "liberal arts education consists of inducting the student into our cultural heritage," but mistaken – I would suggest – in his claim that "liberal arts education, in some form or other, is inevitable."

What is inevitable is the *creation* of the art, the literature, the music, the philosophical and theological texts, and the range of scientific inquiries that comprise the liberal arts, for these creations grow from an essential and inevitable impulse of the human spirit. But it is by no means inevitable that liberal arts *education* will survive. Here is why I would make that case.

Wolterstorff's claim that "there has never been a society in which the twin passions of preservationism and eclecticism have been so intense as they are in modern Western society" may apply well to Europe. But America, I would argue, is particularly immune and indifferent to the liberal arts.

America is largely immune and indifferent to the liberal arts since America – as a civilization – is largely immune to history, which is the bearer of the liberal arts tradition. In fact, America has always been characterized by a profound sense of historylessness. Put another way, Americans by and large view history as irrelevant.

Henry Ford put it best when he flatly stated that "history is bunk." If Americans wish to say that someone is irrelevant to a particular situation, we often say to that person, "You're history." If given a choice, American students typically find any course of study preferable to history, believing as they do that history really has nothing to do with much of anything. And in America, we typically bulldoze buildings of any age at all in order to create something that is bright, shining, and new.<sup>2</sup>

If we could unravel how America came to embrace this bias against history – this deep sense of historylessness, as Sidney Mead once described it – we could better understand why it is that liberal arts education is by no means inevitable in our society.

America's sense of historylessness is fed by two primal myths. One of those myths roots the United States squarely outside of human history in that sacred time before ordinary time began. This is the myth of "nature's nation," the myth that suggests that America is not so much the product of historical forces as a reflection of "nature and nature's God," that is, a reflection of the way things were meant to be. The *Declaration of Independence* makes this very point when it points to truths that are simply "self-evident," that is, truths that are rooted not in the vagaries of human history but in the very design of nature. This is a way of grounding the American experience in Eden before the fall. As John Locke wrote in his *Second Treatise on Government*, "In the beginning, all the world was

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<sup>1</sup> This response is based on my book, *Myths America Lives By*

<sup>2</sup> Originally cited in *Myths America Lives By*, 154-159.

America" (29). But Thomas Paine put it best when he wrote that, when we view America, "we are brought at once to the point of seeing government begin, as if we had lived in the beginning of time" (Foner 376).

The second primal myth also locates the American identity outside of ordinary time, but at history's end rather than at history's beginning. If the first myth is the myth of "nature's nation," this second myth defines the United States as "the millennial nation," that is, the nation that will usher in the final golden age for all human kind. The Great Seal of the United States captures this vision well. Proclaiming America a "*novus ordo seclorum*" or a "new order of the ages," the Seal makes two fundamental points. First, the United States is fundamentally disconnected from all human history, which is represented on the seal by a barren desert terrain. And second, when Americans argued that this nation was a "new order of the ages," they implicitly suggested that the birth of the United States had launched at least the beginning of that golden age that would bless the world. Other elements in the Seal make this point abundantly clear.

Long before the Seal was designed, however, leading Americans had elaborated this vision. John Adams, for example, confided to his diary in 1765, "I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth" (Tuveson 25). Years later, Lyman Beecher expressed in almost classic terms the vision of the "millennial nation" that would renovate humankind. The United States would lead the world, he said, until "the world's hope is secure. The government of force will cease, and that of intelligence and virtue will take its place; and nation after nation cheered by our example will follow in our footsteps, till the whole earth is free... Then will the trumpet of Jubilee sound, and earth's debased millions will leap from the dust, and shake off their chains, and cry, 'Hosanna to the Son of David'" (37).

My point is simply this: America has always defined itself by drawing on these two primal myths: the myth of "nature's nation" and the myth of the "millennial nation." Both myths stand squarely outside of human history, and to the extent that the United States draws on these myths for its self-understanding, America stands outside human history as well. In truth, these myths bracket ordinary time, and history, as it were, is like water under the bridge – essentially irrelevant.

It is precisely this sense of historylessness that allows many Americans to imagine that the American experiment is infinite, with no meaningful relation to finite history whatsoever. Ronald Reagan put it well when he proclaimed in his State of the Union address of 1987 (Reagan), "The calendar can't measure America because we were meant to be an endless experiment in freedom, with no limit to our reaches, no boundaries to what we can do, no end point to our hopes." Reagan's comment helps explain why so many Americans live their lives in the eternal present, a present informed and shaped not by history, but by those two golden epochs that bracket human time.

With these perspectives at work in our civilization, is it any wonder that American students have little use for history? And if the liberal arts tradition focuses on the contents of human history – its art, its music, its literature, and its historical artifacts – it seems safe to conclude that liberal arts education is far from inevitable in the United States.

Wolterstorff does well to avoid laying the blame for this problem at the feet of our students who regularly ask with obvious impatience, "How will the liberal arts tradition help me become a computer programmer, or an engineer, or an accountant?" The students who ask these questions are finally not the ones at fault. For American students are merely the product and reflection of a larger civilization that denies the importance of history and its works – a civilization, for example, that in the course of its occupation of Iraq, thought it more important to defend oil wells than to defend the museums that once housed some of the richest historical artifacts known to humankind.

If we imagine that liberal arts education is simply inevitable in the United States, that tradition may very well die. Our task, therefore, is to carefully nurture that tradition, and we can nurture it best by providing our students with a deep sense of history. This is a risky undertaking, one that is both counter-cultural at its core and revolutionary in its implications. Nonetheless, if we can achieve that task, even to a small degree, we might then be able to nurture in our students a profound appreciation for the *contents* of that history, especially the heritage of the liberal arts.

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