

## Religion & Philosophy

### *THE DEFEAT OF THE MIND.*

By Alain Finkielkraut. Translated by Judith Friedlander. Columbia Univ. Press. 165 pp. \$22.95

To most Americans, the current quarrel over "cultures" seems to be the product of unfortunate developments in U.S. society during the last few decades. Movements such as Afrocentrism and multiculturalism have arisen in this country, according to their proponents, in response to the continuing evils of racism or to the illegitimate claims to dominance of white America in particular or Western culture in general.

As Allan Bloom argued in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), these particularistic claims have been especially successful in American higher education because widespread relativism has undermined the defense of culture in Matthew Arnold's sense as "the best that has been thought and said." "Cultures" have trumped "culture." This complaint was once considered conservative. But by the early 1990s, even such certified liberals as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., were decrying the cavalier deprecation of our real, if unfinished, achievements in civil rights and human dignity in favor of the disuniting of America.

Finkielkraut, a French intellectual of distinction and growing reputation, argues in this recently translated book that, *hélas*, the quarrel between civilization and cultures goes back at least to the 18th century. When Enlightenment Reason (initially French) and the universal rights of the French Revolution threatened the very existence of alternatives, they elicited a reaction. In Germany, Herder and the Romantics proposed national *Kultur* and the *Volksgeist* as humane counterweights to the powerful but abstract civilization of France.

Finkielkraut notes that these national characteristics quickly became complicated and intermixed. In Germany, Kant and Hegel accepted and further developed universalism. In France, a reactionary such as Joseph DeMaistre could invoke the French *peuple* against the universalism of the French revolutionaries. *Universal* and *particular* were not simply French or German, liberal or conservative, but could be used for

various purposes. Some figures, such as Goethe, switched sides: Goethe began as a Romantic but evolved into a proponent of universal human values and *Weltliteratur*.

As Finkielkraut points out, particularisms have a nasty history in the 20th century. From the anti-Dreyfusards in France to the contemporary advocates of *tercermundismo*, they have justified the crushing of individual rights and critical judgment. (Marxism, in Finkielkraut's view, was an antirational particularism of the proletariat despite its Hegelian underpinnings.) Ironically, says Finkielkraut, some of the very institutions created to prevent such movements from recurring soon began promoting them. UNESCO, for instance, was founded after World War II to spread universal principles after the lessons of Hitler. But it quickly fell prey to Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological reading of human history, which, out of honorable motives, refused to make judgments among different cultures.

Postmodernists relish such relativism because it underwrites a freedom in which what Michel Foucault called "absolute divergence" of thought reigns. Toward that end, no cultural or social practice can be "higher" than any other. Great works of art or thought, by definition, cannot exist. There can only be folkways and folklore in which, say, modes of shopping are as significant as serious music.

"Once hating culture becomes cultural in itself, the life of the mind loses all significance," the author warns. Worse yet, he finds that the "defeat of the mind" is already largely achieved. Without a successful counter action, Europe's (and, we might add, America's) only remaining attraction will be prosperity.

—Robert Royal

### *ARGUING EUTHANASIA: The Controversy over Mercy Killing, Assisted Suicide, and the "Right to Die."*

Edited by Jonathan D. Moreno.  
Touchstone/Simon & Schuster.  
251 pp. \$11

In November 1994, the voters of Oregon overturned two millennia of medical tradi-