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BOOK NEWS AND REVIEWS

From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life (2000) by Jacques Barzun New York: HarperCollins.

The author is a noted cultural historian with a long and illustrious career as a Professor of History and Dean of Faculties at Columbia University. He has written an extraordinary description and analysis of the rise and decline of Western civilization during the last five centuries. Barzun (1907-) says that he started collecting materials for this book in the 1920s (p. x) when he began studying different historical periods and individuals. Each part of this book covers roughly 125 years of history by discussing the major religious, political, social, literary and scientific occurrences of the period. Barzun also includes many quotations and detailed discussions of individuals who influenced each period. His depth of understanding of the ideas and contributions of these individuals makes this a very informative book – historical events “come alive” because they are anchored in the life histories of these thinkers and doers.

Barzun discusses many historical themes in each part of his book such as emancipation, primitivism, individualism, reductivism, secularism and relativism. Two of the most over-riding themes are: (1) ideas have important consequences upon individuals and nations; and (2) individuals can have a significant impact on the course of history. What would the world be like today if Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Albert Einstein had never existed?

Barzun’s extensive knowledge of Western civilization is all-encompassing, and is based upon several decades of careful study and writing. Clearly his well-reasoned statements about modern society must be taken seriously by all educated individuals concerned with the drift of modern culture and politics. In this regard, his use of the word “decadence” refers to the following:

“But why should the story come to an end? It doesn’t, of course, in the literal sense of stoppage or total ruin. All that is meant by Decadence is ‘falling off.’ It implies in those who live in such a time no loss of energy or talent or moral sense. On the contrary, it is a very active time, full of deep concerns, but peculiarly restless, for it sees no clear lines of advance. The loss it faces is that of Possibility. The forms of art as of life seem exhausted, the stages of development have been run through. Institutions function painfully. Repetition and frustration are the intolerable result. Boredom and fatigue are great historical forces.

“It will be asked, how does the historian know when Decadence sets in? By the open confessions of malaise, by the search in all directions for a new faith or faiths. Dozens of cults have latterly arisen in the Christian West: Buddhism, Islam, Yoga, Transcendental Meditation, Dr. Moon’s Unification Church, and a larger collection of others, some dedicated to group suicide. To secular minds, the old ideals look outworn or hopeless and practical aims are made into creeds sustained by violent acts: fighting nuclear power, global warming, and abortion; saving from use the environment with its fauna and flora (‘Bring back the wolf!’); promoting organic against processed foods, and proclaiming disaffection from science and technology. The Impulse to PRIMITIVISM animates all these negatives.” (pp. xvi-xvii).

From Dawn to Decadence should be read in small segments rather than digested in a few intellectually gluttonous meals. Gifted students will learn more from this book by reading each part, and reflecting upon and discussing the meaning of Barzun’s presentation. For example, ***Part I: From Luther’s Ninety-five Theses to Boyle’s “Invisible College,”*** should be studied in a deliberate manner, section-by-section. They will learn about the Protestant Reformation and its impact upon the growth of primitivism and individualism. Major figures such as Martin Luther, Erasmus and John Calvin are discussed in relation to these themes. Gifted Students will also see that “good letters” also paralleled the Reformation in the form of Humanism, the study of ancient history, literature, language and philosophy as a means of increasing scholars’ understanding of the human condition. Barzun discusses the Italian poet, Petrarch (1304-74), and the founder of the Florentine Academy, Marsilio Ficino (1433-99), as among the best examples of the Humanist mind. **Part I** includes a chapter (**The “Artist” is Born**) on the development of art and architecture during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In addition, Barzun has chapters (called “Cross-Sections”) on Madrid around 1540 and Venice around 1650 to show the reader how life and ideas functioned during a particular time and place. Gifted students can learn a great deal from these “Cross-Sections” about how all levels of society lived and thought. The chapters on these cities are a wonderful pedagogic method for comparing societies of 350 or more years ago with modern Western society.

In a time when the United States and other nations are being threatened by Islamist religious extremists, it is important to teach gifted students about the historical foundations of Western civilization. This is not simply an exercise in current “standards of learning” or high stakes assessment. Our very existence depends upon whether gifted students can understand the roots of society, free of cultural relativism and political correctness. Barzun’s book will provide them with a clear discussion of the origins and importance of Western civilization.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS ON PHILOSOPHY --

Adler, Mortimer J. (1981). **Six Great Ideas**. New York: Macmillan.

Allen, Reginald E.(1985). **Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle**. New York: The Free Press.

Aristotle. (2001). **The Basic Works of Aristotle**. New York: Basic Books.

Aurelius, Marcus. (2002). **Meditations**. New York: Random House. Gregory Hays, Translator.

Berry, Wendell. (2000). **Life Is A Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition**. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint.

Buber, Martin. (1970). **I and Thou**. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Cavalier, Robert. (1990). **Plato for Beginners**. New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc.

Cicero. (1971). **On the Good Life**. New York: Penguin Books.

Durant, Will. (1953). **The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Great Philosophers**. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Edmonds, David and Eidinow, John. (2001). **Wittgenstein's Poker**. New York: HarperCollins.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. (2000). **The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson**. New York: The Modern Library.

Fernández-Armesto, Felipe. (1997). **Truth: A History and a Guide for the Perplexed**. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Forstater, Mark. (2000). **The Spiritual Teachings of Marcus Aurelius**. New York: HarperCollins.

Gaarder, Jostein. (1994). **Sophie's World: A Novel About**

the History of Philosophy. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Gardiner, Patrick. (1988). **Kierkegaard**. New York: Oxford University Press.

Heaton, John and Groves, Judy. (1994). **Introducing Wittgenstein**. New York: Totem Books.

Heraclitus. (2001). **Fragments: The Collected Wisdom of Heraclitus**. New York: Viking Books. Brooks Haxton, Translator.

Hume, David. (1739-40). **A Treatise on Human Understanding**. New York: Penguin Books.

Lucretius. (1995). **On the Nature of Things**. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Magee, Bryan. (1997). **Confessions of a Philosopher: Journey through Western Philosophy**. New York: Random House, Inc.

Menand, Louis. (2001). **The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America**. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Phillips, Christopher. (2001). **The Philosophers' Club**. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.

Plato. (1999). **The Essential Plato**. New York: Book-of-the-Month Club.

Pojman, Louis P. (1998). **Classics of Philosophy**. New York: Oxford University Press.

Russell, Bertrand. (1975). **A History of Western Philosophy**. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Van de Weyer, Robert. (1998). **Spinoza In A Nutshell**. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Wilson, Edward O. (1998). **Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge**. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. ***

Relating the Cuban Missile Crisis (October 1962) to the Current War on Terrorism by Michael E. Walters **Center for the Study of the Humanities in the Schools**

October 2002 was the 40th anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis when the world was on a precipice of nuclear warfare. It is ironic that this anniversary occurred at the same time as the present crisis involving Iraq and its arsenal of Weapons of Mass Destruction. Gifted students should study, analyze and think about the ramifications of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and its relationship to ongoing problems of national security.

This past summer I observed an *exhibit on the life of President John F. Kennedy* in Atlantic City, New Jersey. It consisted of the memorabilia of the President collected by his longtime personal secretary, Evelyn Lincoln. The exhibit included extensive materials about the Cuban Missile Crisis. Among the items was the television speech that Kennedy gave to the nation, explaining the tactic of enforcing a quarantine on Soviet ships en route to Cuba. In 2000, a film was released about the Cuban Missile Crisis, **Thirteen Days**. It portrayed the events in a documentary manner, and the conflicts among the President's advisors. By watching this film, one can understand the human drama behind the Cuban Missile Crisis and Kennedy's executive ability. It is a wonderful way for gifted students to study leadership under extreme pressure. The film was based upon Robert F. Kennedy's memoir (**Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis**, Norton, 1971). There is an excellent *Web Site* that is an exercise in world politics and leadership skills -- www.thinkquest.org. It presents the various stages of the Cuban Missile Crisis in the Crisis Center, Briefing Room, Situation Room, and Recon Room.. The final stage is the Debriefing Room which provides the opportunity to post one's thoughts on the message board. Here, gifted students can exchange ideas and insights with other gifted students.

The resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis was due to the collaboration of several gifted intellectuals. Besides President Kennedy and his brother Robert (Attorney General), the contributions of such individuals as Adlai E. Stevenson (U.N. Delegate), Robert McNamara (Secretary of Defense), and Ted Sorensen (Presidential Advisor and Speech Writer) were critical. The anniversary of this crisis and present tensions concerning terrorism provide important opportunities to focus on the characteristics of highly gifted individuals. For example, President Kennedy was an avid reader. His timely reading of Barbara Tuchman's **The Gun's of August** (Ballantine, 1994) had a great influence on his thought and actions.