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Pilgrims from the New World

Pursuing the phantoms of a historical identity in Europe.

by Suhotra dasa

Americans have been described by many international observers as a people in search of a history. Though the great achievements of this country are undeniable, it is a peculiar American trait to be insecure about the historical significance of the nation when it is compared with, say, the older European cultures from which the majority of the American people sprang. We secretly fear that our flashy prefab "now" culture really has no substance beyond making a fast buck. Almost defensively, as if to validate our niche in history to the world, we've erected imposing monuments commemorating important events and the great men who shaped them during the brief four hundred years since the pilgrims first settled New England. But the success of the television serial *Roots* a couple of years back betrayed the uncertainty of the American identity. Ours is a highly mobile society, ever pushing for new horizons, yet strangely homesick, aching to rediscover lost origins.

This summer, as in every summer, thousands of Americans are visiting Europe to regain a sense of history, gathering as pilgrims from the New World in the somber courtyards of the Old, yearning for a whiff of the eternal. Of course, we've all *seen* the travelogue photos of Buckminster Palace, Versailles, the Hofburg, and the older Colosseum and still older Parthenon—but to *be* there, standing in the shadows of those edifices and taking pictures of ourselves to record for our friends "I've been there"—this somehow lends to our lives an authenticity we're often unable to find at home.

But though ancient and majestic relics do inspire us with a vision of the achievements of our ancestors, they are also testimonials to decline, decay, and defeat. Modern Europe, for all of its carefully preserved memorabilia, is the irregular remnant of a series of empires lost, whose valiant efforts at lasting glory were rewarded by broken dreams. As a result, many Europeans have consigned themselves almost totally to the past, unable to confront the failures of the present. This attitude found expression by a high official of the Austrian government during the recent twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of that country's republic. After narrating in glowing tones the imperial rise and fall of Vienna's Habsburg dynasty, which dominated central Europe for hundreds of years until 1918, he soberly concluded, "But Austria will never decide world events again."

America is certainly still the most powerful nation on earth, and most Americans can hardly imagine otherwise. Yet recent events suggest that time has not obligingly paused for. Americans while they ponder from the vantage point of affluence the significance of their place in history. Is our own empire, that economic colossus which holds half the earth in its embrace, beginning to crumble? Will we soon join the ranks of Greece and Rome, England and Spain, as a people humbled by time? Will it come to pass that our principal claims to fame will be an eroding Mount Rushmore, a tottering Washington Monument, and a ravaged, forlorn Statue of Liberty eagerly photographed by wealthy foreigners?

Unthinkable, perhaps. Yet as the kingdoms of our distant forefathers have faded into memories, so too have their lives. The passing of youthful vigor and the steady march of extinction are inevitable, both for empires and for individuals. Sentimentalizing over the past while overlooking our own decline would be blindness. After all, what will the course of history mean to us when we are dead?

America's search for timelessness is justifiable only in spiritual terms. We shall not be able to stop the clock by medicines, by monuments, or by military force. Yet something deep in our consciousness thirsts to trace out the meaning of our existence beyond the brief period of history allotted to it. The reason for this, according to Vedic science, is that we are eternal, although encased in temporary matter. We might designate ourselves "Americans," but as spiritual beings we are only momentary visitors here. The American man's or woman's body we have is only a perishable vehicle for the eternal soul, which shuttles us about through the enjoyments and sufferings of life. When this body is finished off by time, the soul must seek shelter elsewhere. There is no guarantee that we will take another birth in this country, or even in this species.

It is obviously a big mistake, then, for the soul to become enamored with any aspect of material existence. The *Vedas* warn against attachment to land, family, or society, because this attachment will only be cruelly broken by the inexorable hand of death. And such attachment, generated from ignorance of the real 'self, condemns us to an endless series of lives wasted in forgetfulness of our eternal nature. This forgetful condition is called *samsara*, the cycle of birth and death.

We are propelled along the wheel of *samsara*, through animal, vegetable, aquatic and human bodies, as long as we are attracted by *maya*, the Lord's powerful illusory energy. This *maya* is described as the binding principle of material existence. *Maya* misdirects our search for meaning and shelter by its display of the wonderful forms of material nature, which, though often beautiful, are temporary. These attractive features of the material world stimulate our senses into actions that bind us by laws of *karma* (reaction), which reward or punish our good and bad deeds with another body at death.

But *maya* is only a shadow of the spiritual realm of Lord Krsna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead. The spiritual world is our real home, and it is free from ignorance and the ravages of time. It is *sac-cid-ananda*—eternal, full of knowledge, and full of bliss. It is here that Krsna, the all-attractive one, displays His pastimes of loving

exchanges with His devotees. And though in the material world we have wandered so far from home, Krsna is ever eager for our return. This is why He has imparted spiritual knowledge in *Bhagavad-gita* as explained by His confidential representative, the Krsna conscious *guru*.

We should not throw away this human form of life uselessly chasing the phantoms of a national or historical identity, or any identity other than our real one. There is no way we can permanently mark the ever shifting sands of time by our vain posturing. If America is beginning to feel the discomforts of her quixotic pursuit for mundane significance, it is high time her people redirect their energies toward a substantial spiritual goal.

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