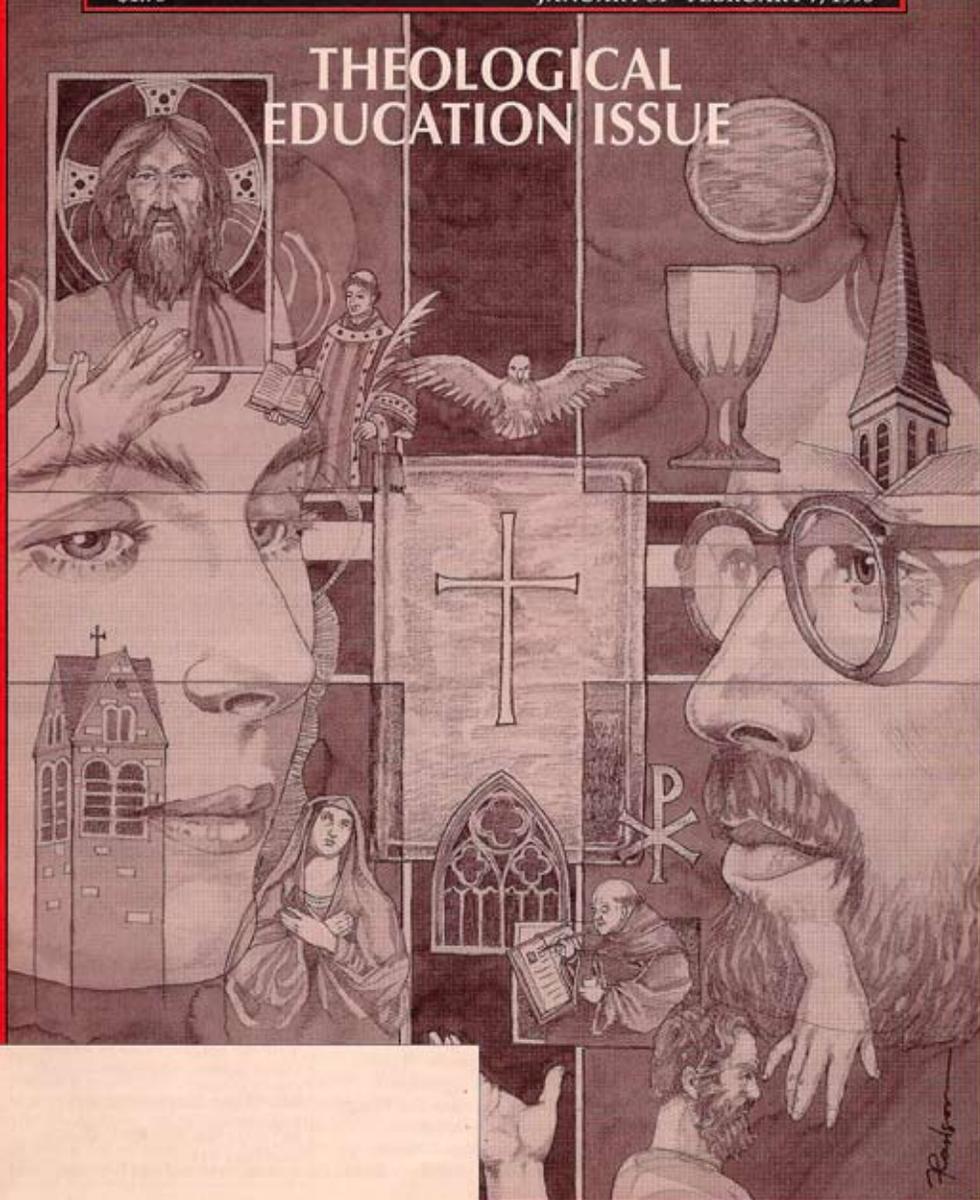


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THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION ISSUE



Dear, Disagreeable New York

By PETER QUINN

IT'S THE SILLY SEASON in America's largest city. Declining crime rates, cleaner streets and a buoyant economy have created a euphoric sense of New York's future every bit as exaggerated and unreal as the black-bile gloom that so recently held sway. To add to the dementia, New York is celebrating the 100th anniversary of Greater New York, which resulted from the 1898 consolidation of Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens and Staten Island into a single city. Over the last century, save for a handful of scholars, no one has given consolidation much thought. But now the usual brigade of party throwers and event mongers has emerged to tout the historic and cosmic significance of melding the five boroughs into The Big Apple.

As part of the festivities, the city's public schools sponsored a special essay contest around the theme "My City, My Family." The winners accompanied Mayor Rudy Giuliani to witness the dropping of the ball atop Times Square on New Year's Eve. A co-worker tells me that, not to be outdone, the private school his sons attend—one of New York's most exclusive—is conducting an essay contest of its own on the theme: "What New Yorkers Have in Common." For starters, the students can rule out the possibility that 99 percent of the city's population will ever send its kids to elite academies, where tuitions often exceed a working person's annual wage.

Before this goes any further, and the bubble of the city's

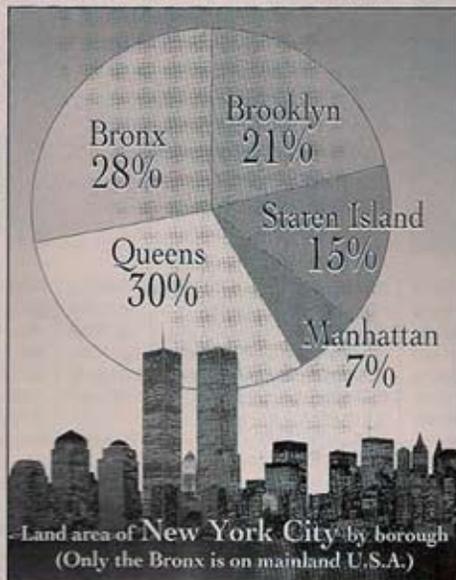
PETER QUINN, corporate editorial director at Time Warner, Inc., is the author of *Banished Children of Eve* (1994), a novel about Irish immigrants in New York City during the Civil War.

era of good feelings gets any bigger, the time has come for a reality check. New York City isn't one big happy family. The single unifying force among New Yorkers, the common denominator shared across lines of race, class, religions, gender, sexual orientation, age, outlook—whatever—is the utter absence of a single unifying force or common denominator. You want unity of culture? Try Prague or Paris. A one-religion town? Teheran or Riyadh. Uni-ethnic? Dublin will do.

Back in the 1950's, when I was a kid in the Bronx (a borough in which ethnic divisions were often etched in the sidewalks), people were always trying to come up with theories about how beneath all their differences of temperament, appearance and belief, New Yorkers are really alike. Baloney. They were—and are—utterly different. Right from the start, the Dutch didn't get along with one another and especially with their stiff-necked Governor, Peter Stuyvesant. According to one historian, "Stuyvesant plunged from one crisis to another, sometimes clashing with the directors in Amsterdam, sometimes quarreling with the colonists." No wonder, then,

that while most of the city's colonial rulers have long been forgotten, Stuyvesant is still remembered. Temperamental, self-righteous and abrasive, he seems the perfect role model for the city's current chief magistrate.

THINGS ONLY GOT WORSE after the English came along and stole from the Dutch what the Dutch had snookered from the Native Americans. By the time the Dutch and English had arrived at a *modus vivendi*, the Revolution put the Patriots and Loyalists at each other's throats. The post-Revolutionary town was a hotbed of political and class tensions. Volunteer fire companies often engaged in pitched battles for the privilege of putting out



fires that continued to rage while the fire laddies rioted. In the 1840's, the Irish showed up in large numbers, and this Celtic infusion forever confirmed the city in its innate contentiousness.

Not long ago, I mentioned to a friend of mine how silly it is to think that New Yorkers have anything in common. Being a native of Winona, Minn., and still misty with the sentimental delusions that flower among those who have never ventured far outside the precincts of Greenwich Village or the Upper East Side, she demurred. "We are united by the poetry of place," she said, "by our rivers and harbor, by the same magnificent expanse of Atlantic sky."

Yeah, sure. Do me a favor, lady. Next time you're on the subway, ask the person next to you when he last looked up at the sky (other than to see if it was raining or to avoid aerial bombardment by New York's flying rats, a k a pigeons). Rivers? Huh? Wanna bet that your average cabby wouldn't mind a bit if the Hudson and East Rivers were paved over and turned into expressways? (Hey, if Robert Moses had lived a little longer, they probably would have been.)

New York is about argument, ambiguity and attitude. Even the city's ethnic groups, which can sometimes appear monolithic from outside, are nothing more than organized civil wars. Think I'm exaggerating? Check out the relations in the Hasidic community between the Lubavitchers and the Satmars. Or attend a meeting of the St. Patrick's Day Parade Committee. Or bring together Dominicans and Puerto Ricans to discuss Hispanic solidarity. I once saw two

Italian-American aficionados of Jewish cuisine come to blows over where to find the city's best knish. (Okay, they were lawyers, which might explain a portion of their combativeness. But, still, in what other city does every fact, event and opinion offer the odds-on possibility of an altercation?)

I HAVE A THEORY that one of the reasons why practically all New Yorkers have a smattering of Yiddish is that the basic disgruntlement of the average Gothamite resonates in the very words themselves. The mother tongue of the one-liner and the comic put-down, Yiddish is the city's equivalent of Esperanto. Even someone who arrived this morning wouldn't need a translator or dictionary to decide whether to be less than complimented when called a schlump, or klutz, or putz, or schnorrer or nudnik.

What do New Yorkers have in common? Bubkis. Look, when push comes to shove—and this is the town where it usually does—New Yorkers aren't just resigned to disagree. They revel in it. Maybe that's what ultimately serves as the city's existential cement. If you're comfortable with the certainty that you're surrounded by people ready and willing (Jeez, they can hardly wait!) to give you an argument, make yourself at home. New York is the place.

If you're not, well, too bad. Who asked for your opinion in the first place? So's your old man. Sue me. Better yet, scram.

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