

Public Schools and the Gnostic Impulse

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IT IS safe to say that the field of public education is not generally held in high esteem today by those on the traditionally defined political or cultural right who might be associated with *Modern Age*, not to mention those other journals less ready to discuss the reality of the relationship between Right Order and these present disordered times.

There are many reasons why those of us with a conception of Right Order are displeased with the state of American public education and they have multiplied in recent decades. Our displeasure goes deeper than the systematic liberal-left position taken by the National Education Association on virtually every topic for which one can think of a liberal-left stance. The collectivist tilt has been chronicled often with searing accuracy and troubling detail to the distress of many educators in the public sector who do not share the institutional statist-positivist orientation.

Former Secretary William Bennett did a convincing job of focusing on what the goals of American education ought to be and used his cabinet position to great advantage to proclaim not only what is wrong with many of our educational endeavors but to recognize positive efforts to accomplish worthwhile educational goals. Lynn Cheney of the National Endowment for the Humanities was to con-

tinue that task in the Bush Administration. But there still exists a suspicion among many of my most respected troglodyte friends and colleagues that public education, and therefore educators, are, *ipso facto*, a part of the cultural wrecking crew.

The following paragraphs can easily be misinterpreted. This writer is largely a product of public education, and though public schools are often guilty of those cultural atrocities listed in the journals of which I am admittedly most fond, they are unquestionably the vehicles through which the vast majority of Americans have received their education during the past century and probably will be during the next. It was while a tenth-grade student in a public high school in Minneapolis, Minnesota, that I checked out the new book by Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (1953), from the public library across the street from the school. After reading that book I was in many important ways never again the same person. The book was central to my newly developing sense of traditional culture, but the public school and the public library also made their contributions (although they may now regret them).

Certainly through the first decades of our century the public school teacher was in many cases a heroic figure in the

unfolding of the American cultural panorama. Any teacher who went out beyond the horizon to Plaza, North Dakota, to spread literacy and culture was at least the educational equivalent of a Sister of Charity. Such a teacher underwent personal hardship to help others appreciate, to one extent or another, that same Culture of the West of which William Bennett spoke and which Stanford University dismisses as racist, sexist, and unjust. True, the level of scholarship was not uniformly high, but the hardships endured were many and the motivation not infrequently of an elevated order.

In fact, it would be hard to imagine individuals who would better fit the ideal image of the social conservative than these men and women. Perhaps a few unreconstructed Manchesterians would prefer a James B. Hill or an Andrew Carnegie, but the social conservative should feel a certain kinship with these early teachers. At what point did the common cultural mandate fail to support what would seem to be a natural alliance?

During the first decades of the nineteenth century publicly supported schools were becoming increasingly available to a broad cross section of the American population. They were financed variously, but they were surely the prototypes of today's public schools. The McGuffey texts were widely used and underscored cultural continuity, the importance of transcendent values and popular morality. The teachers, with some colorful exceptions, provided models of self-control, public service, and individual rectitude. The values being taught were clearly aimed at controlling vice and encouraging virtue as generally understood within the context of the Judaeo-Christian culture. While the tenor was unrealistically optimistic, as would be predicted in a young nation believing its potential to be almost without limits,

McGuffey and Associates were light years from the utopianism that later became associated with what can only be termed as "the public school ideology."

In part the historic seeds of the separation from cultural continuity were sown by Horace Mann. As the great popularizer of the Common School Movement he set a certain tone which was not always and everywhere recognized for what it was. Mann saw the common school as being not an agent for strengthening the Christian West but rather as a vehicle for social reform. According to Mann, if his plan were adopted "... nine-tenths of the crimes in the penal code would become obsolete; the long catalogue of human ills would be abridged; men would walk more safely by day; every pillow would be made inviolable by night; property, life and character held by a stronger tenure; all rational hopes respecting the future brightened." The three evils of gin, tobacco, and profanity would finally be excised from human, or at least American, experience.

Although the development of the common school cannot be completely identified with Mann, his influence was instrumental in setting the future agenda for public education. Although most teachers continued thinking about how students could individually and collectively benefit from a better understanding of their own culture, the idea of public education as a reform movement persisted and grew among those who were in positions to shape public education in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Elwood Cubberly of Stanford University credited the public schools with having been the main force behind the effective assimilation of the immigrant waves that found our shores in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth. But, according to Cubberly, they did more than assimilate immigrants, they democra-

tized those who didn't understand the meaning of democracy. Support for the public schools delineated which groups were on the side of reform and light and which were on the side of reaction and darkness. Cubberly listed those who supported the public schools as being "... Citizens of the Republic, philanthropists and humanitarians, public men of large vision, city residents, intelligent workingmen in cities, non-taxpayers, Calvinists, and New England Men." Those who were opposed to public schools and therefore were the enemies of reform, progress, and the commonweal were identified as "... old aristocrats, conservatives, politicians of small vision, residents of rural districts, the ignorant, narrow-minded, and penurious, taxpayers, Lutherans, Reformed Church, Mennonites and Quakers, Southern Men, proprietors of private schools and the non-English speaking classes."

One can almost see, with a few interesting exceptions, the modern lexicon of those groups blessed with an enlightened view of progress and those not so blessed. Cubberly identified those who were, or were about to become, a part of the new educational *Zeitgeist* and those who were not.

Virtually nobody would mistake the reformist impulse of John Dewey, the presumed American educational philosopher of record. Dewey raised the notion of discarding tradition and custom as an arbiter of value to the level of accepted progressivist dogma. Dewey in fact declared virtual war on the view that schools should transmit the inherited wisdom of generations. The school as a place of calm, ordered reflection, and civilized speculation he declared anathema. When Dewey established himself as the guru of modern educational thought at Teachers College at Columbia that institution was seen as the center of the progressive movement. Traditional cultural conservatives were no longer impressed that

the Sister of Educational Charity in Plaza was the symbol of American public education. While it would be perhaps unfair to say that John Dewey was the educational equivalent of a Bulagrian bomb thrower, neither did he reassure traditional conservatives that the transmission of the patrimony of the West could be left to his cadre of progressive-minded educators. Nor, it must be added, did he attempt that assurance.

Dewey was followed by an entire string of educational thinkers and activists who made clear the implications of Dewey's philosophy. George Counts was perhaps the most direct and honest. He saw the public schools as being the vehicle by which society could be socially and politically transformed. Teachers would form a revolutionary cadre in every community across the land, spreading new ideas of social organization and social justice. He outlined this in a widely distributed, and even more widely quoted pamphlet, *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?* (1932) Such writings were reminiscent of the view of education held by the Bolsheviki and bore an even closer similarity to those of the Mexican revolutionists. A scary sort of philosophy if it were to catch on. It didn't, at least in such feverish rhetorical style.

In short, as anyone schooled or self-taught in the ways of contemporary cultural conservative scholarship could tell, the educational *Zeitgeist* of the American public school today has taken on many of the characteristics of a gnostic cult. Following Eric Voegelin's preconditions for the establishing of a gnostic movement or cult, the new gnostics are dissatisfied with the present order of things, unwilling to accept the cause of that dissatisfaction as being the result of any innate propensity for disorder and chaos within the human soul, and convinced that if temporal society could somehow be reorganized along the lines of their utopian blueprint, the heavenly eschaton

could be immanentized right here in Topeka.

In keeping with the spirit of Horace Mann, public educators have promised everything to everyone in clear expectation that, assuming adequate funding, there is nothing that public education cannot accomplish. There is no problem for which it has not the key, no question to which it has not the answer. This has been going on without interruption for well over 100 years and, strangely, not only has Heaven resisted its recreation on Earth, many of those goals originally addressed are further removed today than they were during Horace Mann's era. People are still drinking the 1992 equivalent of gin, still smoking (albeit the reformist impulse has removed some of the cigar's blessed comfort), and still being profane (although repetitive and mundane vulgarity is on the verge of making a traditional sort of creative profanity attractive). Even violable pillows are no safer than when Mann wrote on the subject well over a century ago.

But still the *Zeitgeist* rolls on. If public education has not yet produced the semi-utopia that had been expected, it is because we have either been underfunded or are still working with flawed formulas. But the search continues. And that explains the overwhelming gullibility of educators who bite on every nostrum that the fast-talking gnostic hucksters have to peddle. The gnostic educator believes that all the problems natural to humankind can be solved by additions to or alterations of the curriculum and/or the introduction of new instructional methodologies. Similarly all the instructional or behavior problems of the school can be solved by the imposition of a particular practice or "model." It isn't that the chant lacks efficacy, it's just that the choir needs new robes and more practice!

In the classrooms there are still many teachers who have retained the skepti-

cal eye toward the promises and the magical educational wands being sold at the school emporia. There are many principals who resist the temptations of gnostic trendiness. These are the educators who view what they do as important but realize the effective limits of what schooling can accomplish. They have no faith in the utopian promises of those whom they often find in positions of school leadership. They realize that literacy and broad education must always be the center of the school and that when that center shifts to social work or athletics the focus of the institution is bound to become diffused and suffer accordingly.

Education itself is not going to usher in an era free from problems. Sex education is no more an effective answer to irresponsible behavior than driver education is to parlous highways. Mann missed the mark when he claimed that the common school was going to redeem man from dangerous streets or from any of the numerous vices toward which we all seem to have strong natural propensities. A good education should give students certain tools with which they can wage their own struggles against disorder and evil with some hope of success. We hope that they can be productive and win some of those private wars. That is why some of us remain in education.

During the career of a teacher with a long professional life, it is not unlikely that the same instructional practice could be seen three times, each time cycled as a new and innovative technique guaranteed to achieve goals which had eluded all previous methods. The major growth industry in education today is turn-key instruction. The current major cult leader in education today is Dr. Madeline Hunter. Hunter has many good and wholly useful things to say about how to organize a lesson and how to teach. A teacher could do a lot worse than to follow the lead of Hunter on how

to deliver instruction to young people, but she has developed a seven-step delivery system for lessons which some of her more zealous followers are touting as the *sine qua non* of good teaching. If these steps are followed all will be well in the classroom. Sorry, the goods that we produce in education do not come with a warranty. The instructions may have seven steps, or ten, or two, and, depending on the magic of the classroom and the almost chemical interaction between the teacher and the students, can be just as successful.

American education is often so trendy that the various trends bump into each other. An interesting instance of this is when another cult leader, Dr. Robert Slavin of The Johns Hopkins University, who had developed a competing delivery system that he calls "Cooperative Learning," complains that American education is too trendy and that somehow the government should research the effectiveness of proposed instructional approaches before they can be implemented by unsuspecting school districts. Slavin does not mention "Cooperative Learning," which he is currently peddling for fun and profit, but is rather pointing to what he maintains is the inferior quality of the Hunter line.

And of course the politicians just add to the problem. With the discovery of a major new social problem now taking place at a rate of at least one every six months, the school is seen as the single institution in American society so extensive (not to say intrusive) as to be used to meet "the challenge." Children are

hungry so we start a breakfast program; children have health needs so we establish school-based health clinics (and I won't even get into the abortion controversy here, although it needs to be gotten into); children have no parents to meet them at home after school and so we establish latch-key programs. In fact those who most frequently complain about politicizing the schools are precisely those who desire the school to address every social ill. As other institutions in society fail their traditional responsibilities, primarily the family and the church, the government more than willingly accepts that waiver of responsibility as a reason to extend its power and reach. The agency of choice of that extended power and reach is most frequently the school.

What is the traditional conservative to do in the public schools? Realizing that public schools today are in many ways a gnostic playground, we must yet persevere. It is incumbent upon us to teach, as we always have, for increased understanding of the indebtedness we have to the culture of which we are a part. We must try to understand those central, transcendent truths that have constituted the foundation on which our culture has developed and share that understanding with as many as will join us. We cannot give what we do not have. Ours is not the frenetic campaign of the revolutionary to restructure the world in fifteen years, but rather to establish an acceptable level of harmony in our own souls and within the commonwealth.