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EDUCATION AND THE PERMANENT THINGS

Thesis: If we are going to transmit the permanent things, we will have to put back into education the moral and metaphysical vision that is foundational to Western education and Western civilization. I hope to illustrate this thesis by discussing Russell Kirk's vision of conservatism and the permanent things, by describing the Christian vision that was historically embedded in education, law, and culture in the West, and by showing that what has replaced the Christian vision in education is woefully inadequate because it has lost sight of the permanent things.

Let me begin with an anecdote, one that relates to my thesis. In the early 1980s I had the good fortune to study with Russell Kirk for two years. He supervised my master's thesis on "Original Sin in Nathaniel Hawthorne's Short Stories and Sketches." Dr. Kirk himself believed in original sin, and after he got to know me, he said I was pretty good evidence of its truth. He occasionally said my intimate knowledge of sin, original and actual, qualified me to write on the subject.

Sometimes I'm surprised Annette and Russell took in and befriended a congenial redneck hillbilly like me. But they did, and I thank them for that. Over

the years they welcomed countless people to Piety Hill: saints and sinners, political refugees and hobos, wayward students and unwed mothers. They opened their home because their hearts were open to the God of Love. Dr. Kirk maintained that openness to the loving “source of all being” is the aim of human life—this, he says, is what the “enlightened conservative” believes and strives for (*Program for Conservatives* 18).

MORAL AND METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATION OF KIRKIAN CONSERVATISM

In many of his works Dr. Kirk argues that conservatism is grounded in moral and metaphysical truths that are the foundation of the permanent things, if not the permanent things themselves. In *Enemies of the Permanent Things*, he describes the permanent things as the “norms of our being,” as “a wisdom more than natural, more than private, more than human” (61, 52). One of the norms of our being is that we “are made for eternity” (55). In Kirk’s thinking, these norms of our being and this more than natural wisdom have a transcendent source. Because we have been made in the image and likeness of this transcendent source, because we have rational consciousness, a conscience, and an imagination, we are able to perceive transcendent Truth, Goodness, Beauty, and Justice. Because of this, we are free creatures capable of loving God and one another. Yet one of the other norms of our being makes this difficult: “we all are” imperfect beings (55). Thus we don’t always do as we ought. And that is one great reason why the right sort of education is so important.

In Kirk's groundbreaking book *The Conservative Mind* (1954), the **first** of six basic canons of conservative thought is: "Belief in a transcendent order or body of natural law, which rules society as well as conscience" (8). Thus, he adds, "Political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems." I will be arguing that educational problems, too, are primarily religious and moral problems. I'll get to that momentarily.

Kirk also lists five radical schools of thought and the four canons they share. The **first** canon states: "the radical believes in the perfectibility of man"; he denies "that humanity has a natural proclivity toward violence and sin" (10). The conservative acknowledges that man has this proclivity to violence and sin. Christian theologians call it original sin.

The second canon shared by radicals is "contempt for tradition," rejection of "formal religion," and substituting "various ideologies" for religion to define human nature and forecast man's destiny (10). In other words, the radical is the enemy of the permanent things. The conservative, on the other hand, has respect for "the ancient moral traditions of humanity" and "the wisdom of [our] ancestors" (8); the conservative statesman will always "take Providence into his calculations" (9).

In 1986, when Kirk wrote the Preface to the Seventh Edition of *The Conservative Mind*, he acknowledged that we were in an advanced stage of decay, that education was decadent, that secularism and egalitarianism were destroying

the family and poisoning the culture (xviii). He noted the “vertiginous speed of alteration” in our time. A great deal of water had passed under the bridge between 1954 and 1986—much of it in the 1960s, when revolutionary notions washed away moral, social, and educational norms. Kirk wondered if the “conservative impulse” could “prevent the disintegration of the moral” and social order. The answer, he said, depended upon how well conservatives at that time would “apprehend their patrimony” (xx). Twenty-seven years have passed since Kirk said this, and social and moral flash floods have washed **over** the bridge. While some conservatives may have been apprehending their patrimony, dominant elites in education, the media, the corporate world, and the courts have not.

OUR WESTERN AND AMERICAN PATRIMONY

Let us consider this patrimony, Western and American, especially as it has been exemplified in and transmitted through education. Our Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman roots used to be nourished in the academy, where scholars taught classical and Christian texts to students. Christians became the custodians of humane learning in the West, and thus the Christian faith became the lens through which classical texts were read. In On Christian Doctrine Augustine says that just as the Israelites plundered the Egyptians before heading toward the Promised Land, so Christians should plunder or appropriate classical and secular learning (Richard Gamble, *The Great Tradition* 225). Hellenism was Christianized, first Plato, later Aristotle. Christian educators made the Bible the grand narrative that put all

disciplines, philosophies, and texts into perspective. As David Lyle Jeffrey puts it, Augustine's

pedagogical stratagems for the disciplines [in *On Christian Doctrine*] helped to make the Bible not only the historical foundation for humane learning in the West, but also the procedural and methodological basis of nearly all scholarship in the humanities, including textual criticism, philological analysis, poetics, language theory, narrative epistemology, historiography, anthropology, positive law, and natural law.

Furthermore, Jeffrey notes that from the time of Boethius in the sixth century "onward to the nineteenth century it is difficult to find a major European humanist whose intellectual formation was not in some way grounded in study of the sacred page" ("The Pearl of Great Wisdom," in *Touchstone*, October 2007, 27-28).

Literature as well as learning was profoundly influenced by Christianity. The same is true of law and the arts, both fine and popular. Henry Adams claims that "four-fifths of [Western Man's] noblest art" owes its inspiration to the Virgin Mary and the fruit of her womb. The beauty and power of transcendent love, mercy, and suffering is reflected in countless works of architecture, sculpture, and painting, not to mention literary works (*The Education of Henry Adams* 385).

Christopher Dawson's *The Crisis of Western Education* (1961) and George Marsden's *The Soul of the American University* (1994) chronicle both the development and pervasiveness of Christian education in the West and in America, and its hasty demise. Dawson notes that religious studies "were the original raison

d'être of the Western university" (89). He also claims that Western Civilization is essentially a Christian civilization. Classical literature and Christian learning (biblical and theological) were the basis of Western education from the 4th century until the modern era. But over time, the secularizing intellectual revolutions of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries put science, rationalism, and utilitarian technological studies in place of religious studies and the Great Books.

Marsden's book, concentrating on higher learning in America, demonstrates how American colleges and universities started with and then lost their Christian soul. His subtitle succinctly makes the point: "From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief." While I am no believer in the secular origins of America's founding, I was still amazed at some of the facts Marsden relates about the pervasiveness of Christianity in American education from the 17th to the 19th century. My guess is that most histories of America fail to acknowledge Christianity's central role in anything beyond the Puritan era, and thus that the college educated today are ignorant of a couple of centuries of their patrimony.

Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brown, Dartmouth, King's College, Vassar, Smith, Wellesley, Oberlin—initially all of these and a hundred other colleges were private Christian institutions of higher learning, and most were created to train ministers of the Gospel. "Let every student be plainly instructed and earnestly pressed to consider well, the main end of his life and studies is, 'to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life,' John 17.3, and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom, as the only

foundation of all sound knowledge and learning” (The Rules of Harvard College, 1643). This 1643 rule of Harvard College could have been the rule at practically any American college in the 17th and 18th centuries. Most public colleges and universities were not much different. This is not surprising if one considers Article III of the Northwest Ordinance, dated 1787: “Religion, Morality, and Knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged” (History Department at Hillsdale College, *American Heritage* 103). Of course, the dominant religion then was Christianity, especially the Protestant varieties.

A few quotations from Marsden’s book demonstrate Christianity’s solid footing in American higher education throughout the 19th century. “In 1840 four-fifths of the college presidents of denominationally related colleges were clergymen, as were two-thirds of state college presidents” (81). “As late as 1870 the vast majority of [major universities] were remarkably evangelical. Most of them had clergymen-presidents who taught courses defending Biblicist Christianity and who encouraged periodic campus revivals” (4). “In the 1890s . . . almost all state universities still held compulsory chapel services and some required Sunday church attendance as well” (3). Concerning Christianity’s legal standing in the 1890s, Marsden writes:

it was common to give open legal recognition to the preferential position of Christianity in American life. In 1892, for instance, Associate Justice Brewer, in presenting a unanimous decision of the Supreme Court, argued that the

acceptance of Sabbath laws, prayers in government assemblies, legal oaths in the name of God, and simply the vast public support for Christian activities, indicated that the United States “is a Christian nation.” (333)

THE LOSS OF THE PERMANENT THINGS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The loss of the religious character of learning occurred fairly rapidly—in twenty to fifty years in many institutions. That “long march” through educational institutions was not that long. Exercising what Kirk calls “Judicial Metaphysics,” the judicial branch of the government has outlawed Christian metaphysics in public education (Kirk’s CCA lecture on “The Bible and the Republic in a Secular Age, Hillsdale College, March 1982). The court sealed secularism’s triumph in education in the 1960s. Official disestablishment of Christianity in public schools is decreed in a 1962 Supreme Court decision banning officially sanctioned prayer and a 1963 decision banning official Bible readings (*Touchstone*, Sept/Oct 2013, 19). In our culture at large there has been a corresponding loss of Christian attitudes regarding censorship, pornography, adultery, contraception, abortion, marriage, divorce, homosexuality, and the two genders (some now claiming there are six or even seven genders!).¹ In some states and schools, gender identity non-discrimination laws allow transgendered boys and men to use women’s bath and locker rooms (“Saving Our Locker Rooms” in *Public Discourse*). What was once unthinkable in the recent past is now accepted, even celebrated in many places. Indeed, the new sexuality is

¹ Immediately after my presentation, Robert Young (editor of *Modern Age* and one of the speakers at the “Permanent Things” conference, pointed out to me that in using the word *gender* for *sex*, I had capitulated to the radicals. I agree. There are two sexes, male and female. This is another permanent thing. See Genesis 1.27.

taught, practiced, encouraged and applauded in the classrooms and sexual playgrounds of the modern university. If there is no transcendent order, if the past and human nature are ignored, then anything is possible.

And what of the curriculum? Most colleges have joined the 1989 Stanford revolutionaries who chanted “Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, Western Culture’s Got to Go!” Thus trivial, multicultural, relativistic, sexual and politically correct studies supplant what had been a focus on Western civilization. To ensure that students get a smattering of the Liberal Arts (beyond their scientific and vocational studies), modern colleges and universities offer the following: One can study Tattoos in American Popular Culture at Pitzer, Lady Gaga at the University of South Carolina, How to Watch Television at Montclair State University, American Pro Wrestling at MIT, How to Win a Beauty Pageant at Oberlin College. (www.mycollegeguide.org). Porn studies, Queer studies, “gender” studies, courses on baseball and hair, Vampires and Zombies—you can find anything you want in higher learning today. Again, what was once unthinkable in the recent past is now acceptable.

And so we find ourselves in a crisis—an educational and cultural crisis caused by an intellectual and moral crisis. In the mainstream of American education and American culture, there is no longer anything that orders, unifies, and integrates human experience, knowledge, and learning. Christopher Dawson tells us that “every civilization from the beginning of history down to modern times has accepted the existence of a transcendent spiritual order . . . and has regarded it as

the ultimate source of moral values and of moral law” (199). Then he adds that in Christianity the eternal spiritual reality “has entered into human history” with the Incarnation of the Divine Word (201). In the West, Christianity was the “integrating factor,” the “higher spiritual principle of co-ordination” in education (154, 159). Modern education rejects Christianity, ignores Western heritage, and embraces revolutionary notions of liberty and equality. This leads directly to confusion, narcissism and nihilism. Without tradition and the integrative power of a transcendent order, we cannot envision or move toward a common good.

Let me cite a second Supreme Court ruling to help us see how we got where we are in education, law, and culture. In *Planned Parenthood of Southwestern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, a majority of the United States Supreme Court justices maintained that “at the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” This notion of liberty is all sail and no anchor, or, to change the metaphor, a great spur to dangerous innovations. An often-stated aim of college education is to teach students to think for themselves. Perhaps they should be taught their intellectual, religious, and moral patrimony first, and then urged to seek diligently for the truth, to love what is lovely, and to hate the hateful.

The Supreme Court’s definition of liberty should remind us of an episode in the third chapter of the book of Genesis. It was the serpent who tempted Eve to

imagine a world of her own, one in which man would determine what was good, what was evil.

When we do not follow the natural law, or the revealed law of God, or the good and worthy traditions that have guided us in manifold ways, when we attempt to determine for ourselves the meaning of everything, we are in that Genesis moment. And what do we do with our liberty? We are tempted to do as Adam and Eve did: go our own way, turn away from the God who made us in his image and likeness, the God who is the lawgiver and judge. Because we abuse our liberty, we need the grace of a good education to help us to see and move toward the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. But we will not find these transcendentals if we ignore the author of Nature and the embodiment of Reason and Love in human history. John Milton puts our educational task in perspective in his essay "Of Education": "The end of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright and out of that knowledge to love Him, to imitate Him, to be like Him." (*Areopagitica and Of Education* 59). Modern education, shorn of tradition and transcendence, is like the serpent: It whispers or, rather, shouts, be like God by in effect becoming God, the author of all meaning. Milton would have us to be like God by knowing and learning to love Him.

To adapt the language of Federalist Paper number 51, if men were good angels, we would not need law, government, courts, or education. But because we do not instinctively know and love the truth, because we have appetites, passions,

and interests that darken reason, that thwart the common good, we need education to lead us to the good, to enable us to use our liberty wisely. The ends of higher education are the acquisition of wisdom and virtue and the serious pursuit of knowledge and truth—these are the aims of education as shaped by our Christian heritage. But the two reigning worldviews in America’s higher education, scientific naturalism and postmodern relativism, will never teach us wisdom and virtue. The spirit of inquiry and developments in medicine and technology need to be guided by faith, wisdom, and tradition as well as by reason. Allen Tate famously and bluntly said, “Technology without Christianity . . . is barbarism quite simply” (*Essays of Four Decades*, “The New Provincialism” 539). Education that does not take into account man’s nature and the transcendent is likewise barbarism. We desperately need a moral and a religious or metaphysical framework to put higher education into perspective. This will allow information to rise to knowledge, and knowledge to rise toward wisdom.

To conclude: according to Russell Kirk, genuine education conveys normative wisdom through the study of authorities. With Cardinal Newman and T. S. Eliot, Kirk subscribed to Conscience, the Bible, the Church, and Antiquity as legitimate authorities (*Enemies of the Permanent Things* 58). We should not fool ourselves about modern education. If it does not open up a vision more than scientific, more than nihilistic, it will never reveal those transcendent realities that are our endowment and our patrimony.