

Culture Makes or Breaks an Ordered Free Society
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Preamble

When I was President of the Philadelphia Society thirty years ago we devoted the whole program of our Annual Meeting to the subject of Religion. The various sessions were devoted to such topics as Religion and Freedom, Religion in Contemporary Culture and Religion and Contemporary Politics. Since then, religion has been minimized in our deliberations, unwisely, I think.

Unsure that I can adequately address the assigned topic for this panel, I am going to assert a privilege of extreme old age and just say what I believe needs to be said “to deepen the intellectual foundations of our free and ordered society and broaden the understanding of its basic principles and traditions.” I trust you all will recognize that phrase as the purpose of the Philadelphia Society enunciated in our By-Laws.

For at least half a century, most conservative scholars have plied their trade in their own little corners of the American reality, either oblivious of, or indifferent to, the paramount requirements of an ordered free society. Whatever breakthroughs they may achieve in their own field of work, will profit little if the society is plummeting toward a terminal crash.

Some forty years ago, while I was President of Rockford College, I gave a talk about education at a large national conference. The next speaker, America’s all-purpose genius, Buckminster Fuller, lumbered up to the podium and was quiet for a moment. Then he said, “Before I begin my presentation I want to say something to that fellow who just finished. You folks in the colleges are ruining this country. What you

do is identify the bright students as they come through and make them experts in something. That isn't all bad, but it leaves a residue of people of mediocre intelligence and the dunderheads to become the generalists needed to serve as college presidents." When the laughter subsided, he continued, "and the Presidents of the United States!" That little witticism contained a wallop of earthly wisdom greater than any other single sentence I have ever read or heard.

A generalist has a broad and solid understanding of human nature, also a competent knowledge of the primary social institutions of the society, their interdependence, their vulnerabilities and the principles that govern what they are able to do and unable to do. Such a person has some chance of accurately anticipating the consequences of the decisions to be made in his life and work.

Let's apply this concept to education, certainly a primary institution. It is the field in which I have labored, full-time or part-time, for sixty-one years, twenty-one of them as a college president. My dissertation centered on educational philosophy. Any serious study of the history of education will reveal that until the middle of the 20th century for virtually all societies the core purpose of schooling has been to train the young how to live responsibly and usefully in their own society.

That first and minimal requirement involves imparting to each new generation the ideals which specify the nature and purpose of the society, why those ideals are of utmost importance and the obligations the citizens must fulfill, as well as the taboos they must observe, in order for those ideals to prevail. Those ideals must eventually guide the lives of the young people, who, in America, used to absorb them very much as they learn to speak the language. As long as this acculturation takes place, the society is viable.

Speaking of this process as it relates to education, Robert Hutchins, for sixteen years the President of the University of Chicago, stated in a 1956 lecture:

The pedagogical problem is how to use the educational system to form the kind of man that the country wants to produce. But in the absence of a clear ideal, and one that is attainable by education the pedagogical problem is insoluble; it cannot even be

stated. The loss of an intelligible and attainable ideal lies at the root of the troubles of American education.”¹

With the dearth of generalists, there is today almost no public understanding of the ethos that prevailed in America from 1620 to 1945 and there is an equal shortage of public understanding about the educational philosophy which sustained that ethos. From the arrival of the Pilgrims in New England in 1620, the American experiment in self-government was an embodiment of Christendom. That does not imply that everyone was a Christian. Rather, it designates a society in which the behavior of the people generally accords with the behavioral standards prescribed by Christianity.

That sweeping claim about the enduring regime of Christendom, contradicting what “everybody knows” about our history, is not easy to substantiate in two and a half minutes, but I will present a few mini-quotes which I hope will, at least, provoke some second thoughts.

President James Madison said:

We have staked the whole future of American civilization not upon the power of government: far from it. We have staked the whole future of all our political institutions upon the capacity of mankind for self-government; upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God.²

President John Quincy Adams said:

The highest glory of the American Revolution was this; it connected in one indissoluble bond the principles of civil government with the principles of Christianity.³

De Tocqueville in his searching appraisal of the American society in the 1830’s wrote:

¹ Hutchins, Robert M., *Some Observations in Education*, 1956, p. 31

² McDowell and Beliles, *America’s Presidential History*, pp. 263-4

³ Federer, William J., *America’s God and Country: Encyclopedia of Quotations* (St. Louis, MO; *America Search 2000*, 2000) p. 514

Christianity directs American life. Of all the countries of the world, America is the one in which the marriage tie is the most respected.⁴

Later he wrote:

By their practice, Americans show they feel the urgent necessity to instill morality into democracy by means of religion. What they think of themselves in this respect enshrines a truth which should penetrate deep into the consciousness of every democratic nation.⁵

In World War I, the United States Government provided a New Testament to every doughboy sent overseas.

(Let me insert a footnote here. All these quotes come from my new book on Christianity, which has more than 120 quotations to support and elaborate on the narrative.)

It was Christendom that delivered a society that was basically honest, lawful, conscientious, cooperative, kind, helpful and productive. People under the age of 75 can't begin to imagine what life in America was like prior to World War II.

As an 8-year-old child I would walk my younger brother at night half a mile across a park and the railroad tracks to the Community House for a children's program. My parents hadn't the slightest concern for our safety. At the public grade school I attended, the day began in an all-school assembly with a prayer, a patriotic song and a reading of some uplifting message. Occasionally, our family would go into Chicago, customarily leaving the car unlocked. If the driver, forgetfully left the key in the ignition, the key, the car and any packages were there when we returned. In my company of the First Infantry Division in World War II, almost everybody had two parents or one had died. Divorce was rare in those days and a source of embarrassment. It was assumed that people belonged to a church or synagogue.

Since the patterns of behavior which prevailed were rooted in religion, any effort to weaken or revoke any of the prescribed standards had a tough go, because it was simply taken for granted that God was

⁴ de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Garden City, NY, Doubleday and Company, 1969, p. 547

⁵ de Tocqueville, op. cit., p. 542

more important than anything else. It wasn't until the early Twentieth Century when socialism and then communism spread in America that Christendom began to wane. In the 1912 election, the socialists elected 56 mayors and drew 900,000 votes. In 1919, the Communist Party became the center of revolutionary influence.

In his speech after receiving the Templeton Prize, Solzhenitsyn said:

The world had never before known a godlessness so organized, militarized, and tenaciously malevolent as that of Marx and Lenin, and at the heart of their psychology, hatred of God is the principal guiding force, more fundamental than all their political and economic pretensions.

No dictatorship or godless form of government can tolerate any authority superior to its own, so religion and family are authorities that must be eradicated or, at least, discredited and smothered.

Conservative intellectuals who are partisans of the free and ordered society, whatever may be the focus of their scholarship, must also become active agents working to contain and defuse and discredit the massive assault on Christendom and the family and the rule of law and the core purpose of education. Without a much, much larger contingent of persistent, persuasive, ubiquitous and humble conservative voices, the now dominant forces of greed, envy, lust for power and unbridled gratification of the senses will ultimately have total control, and our cherished free and ordered society will expire in a cataclysm of moral chaos. May all of us, prayerfully, do our utmost to prevent that annihilation.