

THE CRISIS OF THE CAMPUS: SHALL WE FLUNK THE EDUCATORS?

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Editors' note: We hope in each issue of the journal to include a reprint from a significant leader from the past. We are pleased to offer in this inaugural issue an essay by Carl F. H. Henry (1913–2003), the dean of 20th century evangelicalism, the founding editor of Christianity Today, and the author of many books, including the magisterial God, Revelation and Authority. This essay originally appeared in Faculty Dialogue 11 (Spring 1989).

American education is in disarray. Public schools not only face mounting problems, but they also seem to forfeit the very resources they need to cope with those problems. Adrift from God's commandments and divine truth, they have abandoned the word and will of God. No longer do they acknowledge unchanging ethical imperatives and intellectual finalities; moral absolutes and fixed truths they consider antiquated.

Students are left without objective criteria for deciding the truth of a premise or worth of an idea. Truth and right are declared culture-relative. *Veritas* has taken flight; campuses have lost their intellectual and moral cohesion, and their residual social conscience is increasingly geared to self-interest. Someone has said that the *universitas* has yielded to *diversitas*.

Students can no longer automatically expect either truth or godliness from their teachers. Yet the earliest American colleges were founded by Christians to preserve and promote Christian influences. The first nine colleges to open their doors before the American Revolution were all sponsored by Protestant Christians; all but one were denominational schools. Early American universities not only taught but also upheld moral philosophy and ethical standards. Many campuses had Christian clergy as presidents and academically competent ministers as revered faculty members. Students attended Sunday church services and participated in voluntary university chapel meetings. Sometimes spiritual revivals broke out; classes were accordingly suspended so that the schools could give themselves to prayer.

Today our battle is for the future of civilization. In detaching God from nature and history and conscience and cognition, man has become brutalized. Morally and intellectually adrift from true religion and revealed ethics, multitudes increasingly succumb to paganism. The dangers that now engulf our vagabond culture are so serious that my latest book bears the title *Twilight of a Great Civilization*.

Recently the president of an ecumenically pluralistic seminary told a group of academic administrators that we now live in a "post-Christian age." "There is no hope," he said. "The seminary is a coffin; as president, I am polishing the coffin," he added; "the trustees are pallbearers carrying the coffin, and we are all on the way to the cemetery looking for a hole in which to bury it."

One would be less surprised had a disillusioned secular educator voiced these sentiments. Much of modern education has lost not only fixed and final truth, and unchanging morality, but also any basis and reason for hope. Liberal education is slipping into the black hole of paganism.

I grieve over the condition of many of the secular universities. For in this colossal turning-time they lack intellectual consensus and flounder in confusion. Much as we must speak of their failures, however, we as evangelicals should not exhaust our energies in simply deploring their plight. A Christian phalanx, however much a

minority, can impart a sense of purpose to a nation and to the world no less than did the Early Church in a former dark age of paganism. God is calling evangelicals to a greater sense of responsibility in the arena of education, and also in that of the mass media, and of politics. By not speaking up in the present cultural debate, we will fail not only the church and society, but God as well. If those of us who bear the burden of evangelical intellectual engagement withdraw, the renegade world will continue unchallenged in its caricature of evangelicals as either political extremists, snake-handling revivalists, or submental dinosaurs.

Some leaders foresee in the 1990s an extraordinary opportunity for restoring Christian perspectives in at least some of the universities; they envision also a remodeling of evangelical education that manifests itself to be both academically powerful and faith-affirming in the highest sense. I agree with them. I would not be here if I did not hope for a positive resurgence of valid evangelical education. All evangelical Christians, I believe, are duty-bound to participate Christianly in today's pluralistic dialogue concerning American education. The burden of this engagement comprises also an extraordinary and unique opportunity for evangelical intellectuals.

Unless Christian education publicly expounds its way of knowing God; and unless it strenuously proclaims universally valid truth; and unless it identifies the criteria for testing and verifying the knowledge-claims we make, then the Christian view of God and the world will survive as but a fading oddity in an academic world that questions its legitimacy and appropriateness. We do not ask secular universities whose religion departments teach the great religions of the world merely as historical phenomena exerting no universal truth-claim to engage instead in Christian evangelism; we simply ask them to tell the truth about Christianity, and to present it on its own grounds and not as twentieth century relativists reconstruct it.

The late Charles Malik, former chairman of the United Nations General Assembly, held that no task is currently more crucial than to examine the Western university and to maintain an evangelical presence and participation that offers a viable alternative to its erosive naturalism.

Future generations will look back and ask why, amid a colossal culture-crisis torn by furious thunderclouds of conflicting minds and wills, American evangelicals – 50 million of them – were so intellectually ineffective while the outlook of modernity swayed in the balances. We who live in this greatest world-power in all human history seem to be embarrassingly and incredibly silent amid the deeply divided soul and heart of this nation.

For more than a century – in fact until about a hundred years ago – American higher education was largely Christian. Richard John Neuhaus remarks that the now dead founders of great Christian institutions have become disenfranchised and their constituting visions have been betrayed. Even the thesis that theology is something that has to do with God is now an embattled premise on some of those campuses. The loss of initial orientation has involved an enormous shift in student values. Some dormitories are hardly a home away from home; students talk openly about shacking up on campuses where counselors and deans often take permissive sex for granted.

In Britain Parliament has made religion an indispensable part of the national educational curriculum; it has stipulated, moreover, that Christianity be taught, not indeed for reasons of evangelism but rather to define the inherited culture. As recently as a century ago no one in England could be admitted to Oxford University without subscribing to the Nicene creed. Today in America a graduate student who affirms Nicene Christology would on some campuses be considered past his mental prime. Religion as taught on some American university campuses reflects the non-Christian religions and bizarre modern cults as much as if not more than Christianity; even if not discounted, Christianity is crippled by higher criticism and historicism. Sociologist Peter Berger has remarked and rightly than no world religion has ever had to cope with so insistent an attack on its fundamental beliefs as has Christianity by those who profess to be its adherents.

Enlightening indeed is the comment of a one-time fervent American evangelical whose mainline denomination was grooming him a half generation ago to become an ecumenical Billy Graham.

Speaking of doubts nurtured in the classroom and of his waning faith that characterized the experience also of many university students, he observed:

God took ill, slowly wasted away, and then one day was gone. Intellectual doubts would rise, and I would cover them over with prayer, devotion, service. There would be a wisp of smoke, a flicker of flame, than a blaze, and I would have to fight the fire, and I did it many times, but finally I could no longer believe in a God who by any stretch of the imagination could be described as Father. What the universe said was nothing like that. It seemed that the universe was as indifferent to us as to beetles, sharks, butterflies. I came to the conclusion that we do not matter, except to each other.” (Chatelaine, Feb., 1975 issue, “The Real Charles Templeton,” by Sylvia Fraser, p. 77.)

As the post-Enlightenment generation increasingly sealed off religious concerns as matters of private preference, the West sought to build a culture without God and on the basis of only science and technology. A secularized doctrine of church and state segregated religion from public affairs and implied that God has nothing to do with the historical destinies of a nation. Despite the grim specter of Hitler and the Nazis, we seem to have learned little about the high cost of abandoning God and moral absolutes. The religion of the Bible is largely expunged from the public arena; the universities, the mass media, and the political realm have become largely a-theistic if not atheistic.

Yet the modern world, alongside its loss of the Judeo-Christian heritage, is becoming more religious while it becomes less godly. Human beings are by nature religious; if revealed religion is obscured they will simply pursue false religions. Worse yet, many intellectuals are no longer sure just what religion is. Some consider communism a religion, other speak of drug-induced psychedelic experience as religious. Some intellectuals cannot seem to differentiate God from the devil.

For all that, evangelical Christianity is experiencing some gratifying gains on secular campuses. Here and there concessions are being made toward a balanced pluralism that reflects historical Christianity more fairly in professional posts. The Society of Christian Philosophers has come into being and sponsors a significant journal, *Faith and Philosophy*. There is growing conviction that in the clash of ideas a reintroduction of the Judeo-Christian tradition may alleviate the lost excitement of liberal arts learning. Moreover, evangelical student movements continue to report noteworthy evangelistic success.

The fact remains, however, that evangelical professors on secular campuses are often isolated and that a curious hostility is frequently directed toward qualified evangelical applicants by academic colleagues who support radicals for faculty posts. Evangelical scholars are bypassed because of their personal commitments are considered nonobjective and a threat to the supposed objectivity of the faculty. Secular universities have become mission fields where the conceptual initiative still lies with secular humanism or, as is increasingly the case, with raw naturalism.

There has been no comprehensive reversal of the trends that elicit many of the complaints about secular academe; in fact, the chorus of criticism expands. Today's continuing shift from classical learning has pushed aside academic interest in the great literary works of the past that focus on the perennial problems of philosophy and give shape and substance to the West's cultural inheritance. The tendency to turn to community involvement to recover the excitement of liberal learning allows reformist and political concerns to dwarf the importance of ideas and their consequences. Under way is a counterbalancing effort that seeks to train the mind but dismisses the volitions and emotions as extracurricular concerns; it abandons students to a misdirected quest for self-fulfillment, be it in Yoga or Zen or other consciousness-raising substitutes for spiritual authenticity. What results is a fragmented view of the self, one that disconnects the intellect from faith and so stunts the soul that learning becomes but a faint shadow of what education at its best has to offer.

The bond between university learning and Christian heritage has been severed. What we see at most on secular campuses is a return to faith by some who admit a realm of mystery or transcendence beyond the world of technocratic science and who break with the unrelieved relativism of the recent past by speaking vaguely of the significance of Judeo-Christian values. In a context where individuals seek mainly their own self-interest and in which entrepreneurial ambition dwarfs the sense of call there is little sense of community and of a society in which the deference to the will of God overarches competitive instincts.

Early Christianity provided an impetus for universal education; it had an imperative message for every last man, woman, and child on the face of the earth. Today secular education is prone to overlook the very realities that gave it a universal initiative. It conceals the importance of biblical theism for Western culture, and strips from students and remaining link to enduring truth and a fixed good.

Why then, you may ask, do I as an evangelical spend so much time discussing secular higher learning and so little on the Christian alternative? The fact is, that of the 12 million university and college students in the United States only about 90,000 are enrolled in the 77 member-schools of the Christian College Coalition. What's more, over 97% of evangelical Christian young people attend not Christian but secular universities where today they find little incentive to align intellect and faith even on campuses that once heralded an explicitly Christian origin. The total number of college students enrolled at religiously affiliated campuses is no larger than the student enrollment of two state universities. Only about 3% of the college students in the United States attend Christian colleges that reinforce their faith commitments.

It is imperative that evangelicals mount an alert of conceptual witness that transcends a merely privatized faith. Instead of resorting to a strategic retreat in a humanistic-naturalistic age we need to launch a comprehensive outreach that enlists otherwise "wasted" young minds as humble and devout but active participants in a culture-wide mission. We must rally them to join us in the

incomparably vital and sacred task of rescuing our children and their children and generations yet to come. We need to remind a disillusioned materialistic generation that it is not too late, as C. S. Lewis put it, to be “Surprised by Joy.” We need to train first-rate scholars to live and speak as Christian astronomers and physicists and historians and psychologists and artists. We must so formulate and verbalize the truth that the world will want to listen. We must translate theology into the vernacular of our day, even if Madison Avenue considers words but a manipulative means to a materialistic end. Let us declare and demonstrate what a real education is all about. Let us reinstate an abiding concern for truth and the good, declare the awe of God as the cradle of wisdom, and reaffirm God’s saving work in human life.

If true to its calling, the evangelical college offers the best prospect for elaborating, promulgating, and exhibiting the Christian world-and-life view in a comprehensive and consistent way. In their promotional literature evangelical colleges have always flaunted this world-life academic perspective as specially distinctive of evangelical education. Unfortunately, not all evangelical schools fulfill this high promise. Sociologist J. D. Hunter questions whether evangelical colleges and seminaries do, in fact, effectively transmit evangelical orthodox views to the oncoming generation (*Evangelicalism. The Coming Generation*, University of Chicago Press, 1987).

I know that no campus – however evangelical – can be wholly isolated from cultural influences. But is it not a matter of “bait and switch” for a professedly evangelical institution that promises in its public relations to expose students to the control beliefs of biblical Christianity to dilute those beliefs in the classroom by concessions to the secular philosophies that it professes to critique? Is it not both an academic and spiritual tragedy if students, parents and donors are encouraged to think that an institution is firmly committed to the evangelical faith when students in one or another department of that school are presented instead with neo-orthodoxy or some other distortion of an authentic scriptural stance? Slowly but surely the inherited commitments are put under pressure, are spared suffoca-

tion only by a thousand qualifications, until finally they collapse under the weight of alien compromises and logical inconsistency.

In *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon and Schuster, 1986) Allan Bloom pictures the college and university life of American young people as an escape from the authoritarian rigidity and ethical sterility of the home, and as a final opportunity for permissiveness before being thrust into a world that will hold them publicly accountable. In this amorphous interlude, says Bloom, the universities bear at least some responsibility for civilizing the American student. Yet the sad fact remains that universities have forfeited the very transcendent realities that make possible the maturing of the human mind and the sensitizing of the human spirit. The classroom accords no significant role to the God of the Bible, to fixed and final truths, to changeless moral imperatives. The radical moral rebels are not alone in holding ethical realities at a distance; they are joined by more and more mainstream academicians who ask whose morality is to be taught if students are to be morally instructed, and imply that no universally valid truth-claim any longer attaches to ethical commitments. If the campus is to reshape the life of American youth, it is clearly the Christian campus that must rise to the task.

It is absolutely astonishing, however, that in a land where two-thirds of the population is Protestant, and 50 million persons profess to be born-again-evangelicals, so few believers champion any program of higher education other than what currently exists; the specifically evangelical campuses they support reduce, moreover, to a handful of evangelical colleges and seminaries.

Unfortunately, even those evangelical campuses now often inherit young people who at home have acquired little moral and theological instruction over and above the most elemental restraints; even many churches and Sunday schools leave our youth grossly unprepared for constructive moral and intellectual participation in an increasingly pagan society.

Over and above an evangelistic appeal that often hurries over the crucial intellectual issues, can we as evangelical Christians respond effectively to the present crises in education? Can we engage

seriously in the battle for the human mind and will in a society that disavows our assumptions about the truly real world? Can we confront an academic phalanx that boldly claims to have demolished evangelical presuppositions when for the control-beliefs of biblical theism it has in fact merely substituted a rival set of presuppositions dictated in advance by the naturalistic creed of a radically secular age? Shall we merely direct our peals of thunder and flashes of lightning against secular education, or shall we step into the gap that even some of the best young student minds wish we would fill?

Not long ago a graduate of a college – a denominational college, moreover – wrote me out of the blue to say that during his campus studies he had been shaken head to foot by biblical criticism and that “ungodly religion majors made me fight for my faith.” “The intensity of the world situation,” he continued, “soon let me to cop out. I sinned a lot – sex, alcohol, drugs. Some of my Christian fellow students,” my correspondent continued, “were soul-winners who considered intellectual endeavors unspiritual; they were better at proclaiming truth than at defending it on rational grounds.” My correspondent conceded that he himself was “more of a prophetic fire than a philosophical incinerator,” as he put it. “But I believe we need preachers today who are also theologians and theologians who are also preachers. I wish we evangelicals,” he added, “could get away from populism and use our whole persons rather than just appearance and emotion.” Next he thanked me – I add this modestly – for lifting him above “irrational complacency over secularistic society” and for calling him to put his whole life on the line in the present culture-crisis. “Your essays deal with an evangelical worldview and urge an application of the Word of God to the whole of life,” he wrote. “I have begun to suspect that good books are to be prized more than food and lodgings.”

We must go beyond mere negative disdain for secular humanism and steamy neo-paganism, so that we are perceived as on the side of reason and not as hostile to reason, and as supportive of liberal arts education and not as opposed to it. Let us promote positive criticism, criticism that grasps the motivation and intention of the nonevangelical views for what they are without carica-

turing and maligning them, yet noting their serious weakness and incoherence. Let us exhibit the cognitive and moral power of the Christian alternative, showing how in proposing to rescue the human race from moral alienation it also rises above the devastating inconsistencies and ethical compromises of our secular society.

We have no mandate to impose Christian beliefs upon a pluralistic society. But we do have a mandate for presenting evangelical realities in a winsome spirit, and in an intellectually and morally compelling way. That is why we cannot be content with a merely comfortable evangelical coexistence of polite silence in a secular society. A reduction of the Christian mission is a betrayal of our task in a culture victimized by theological and ethical erosion. That task is the more urgent now that Western youth turns to consciousness-exploding chemistry for life’s supreme thrill and treats as a quasi-religious experience of the Transcendent a drug-induced hallucination that escapes rational and moral inhibitions. It is all the more urgent now that Western philosophy flirts with deconstructionism, the view that no logos, no reason, to purpose structures the universe and human life. We need to protest the premature closure of the university mind, which excludes Jesus Christ from its universe of discourse even while it relates all its assumptions about man and society and human destiny to philosophical conjecture and ideologically loaded causes, and which by disavowing the Christian agenda refuses to transmit the biblical heritage of a younger generation. We need to lift a banner for God’s truth and for the good precisely where others disown it as discredited and restrictive, when in fact it is comprehensive and liberating.

We can still contribute to the right ordering of the world in our own special moment of history. We can show our continuing devotion to the *Veritas* that Harvard and their venerable institutions have forsaken. We can make a bold stand for God’s rightful priority in modern life and for truth and virtue. Only if it rightly perceives the Way, the Truth and the Life, and grasps anew the possibility and plausibility of spiritual regeneration, will our fragmented society rediscover its lost coherence.

We can applaud the honesty of once-Christian universities that now publicly admit their radical change to secularization and no longer claim to be Christian or to reflect the Christian heritage. They deserve more credit than do institutions that continue a profession of evangelism, but are concessive in their commitments. Every sincere effort to clarify institutional purposes, to foster a sturdy Christian world-view, and to reinvigorate a distinctive way of life, deserves commendation.

But for an evangelical campus, belief in the centrality of the self-revealing God, the singular divine incarnation of Jesus Christ, and the Bible as the norm of Christian truth must be not merely one characteristic among many others, but the unmistakable comprehensive and integrating fact. As committed participants in the world of learning we must manifest a commitment both to intellectual integrity and to evangelistic compassion. The evangelical affirmation is not that Jesus Christ is simply a way of truth and life for a beleaguered segment of humanity, but that He is *the Way, the Truth and the Life* for all mankind.

We do not see human culture as salvific for it has no resources to impart redemptive grace. Yet culture at its best can nonetheless be a seawall against rising tides of barbarianism. Unfortunately, however, much of contemporary academe no longer serves this function; efforts to identify and to preserve timeless truth and enduring ethics are scorned by many of its influential voices. Surely education has run amuck when a prestigious university will seek out and pay an exorbitant salary to an atheistic professor, when undergraduates are deliberately taught to disparage the reality of true knowledge, when university classrooms refuse any longer to integrate theological nuances and secular emphases, when students for the sake of doctorates write dissertations on what they don't necessarily believe, when the grip of the Enemy motivates scholars to treat God as a term of contempt.

To challenge the naturalistic tide in a society that has forgotten what soul searching is all about, we need evangelical faculties with cognitive and communicative power to quicken and to nurture the great spiritual concerns of life. If ever this generation is to become

a generation of virtue, it needs to be dramatically confronted by those who smell the acrid, enveloping smoke of our pagan age, and who will share the incomparable realities and rewards of new life in Christ that alone can lift the pall of darkness. We need in our midst a post-apostolic vanguard to speak afresh of a still possible Damascus Road experience even in today's wretched existence. We need the sharing of those who by the grace of God have personally moved from disenchantment with secular humanism and its looming abyss of nihilism. In its preoccupation with self-analysis and the self-image our generation is reaching for changes and values that promise release from the cluttered and clogged mind of an unpromising modernity.

Under God it is not too late to restore to collegians a hunger to pursue truth and right in the context of the inspired Word of God. It is not too late to challenge faculty to dedicate themselves to fresh exposition of the Christian view of God and the world in their various disciplines of study. It is not too late for a campus of administrators, faculty, and students who share a corporate vision of the Christian mandate to bring all learning and life into the service of Jesus Christ through personal and group commitment. It is not too late through such evangelical centers to reach out to a cognitively confused and volitionally wayward society. It is not too late for Christian education to claim all the realms of culture for their noblest use and by godly investment of its *raison d'être* to enrich and uplift humanity. It is not too late for academicians grateful for divine revelation, for the divine gift of grace to penitent sinners, and for the life-transforming power of spiritual sanctification, to extend Christ's own victory over injustice and evil to herald the ultimate triumph and lordship of Christ over all mankind and the nations.

In today's anti-intellectual climate can we foresee an evangelical campus that would fully expose entering freshmen to Plato's *Republic* to see how the classic Greek mind held ancient naturalism at bay, how it wrestled such priority concerns as the nature of the ultimate world, the durability of truth and the good, and the ideal content of education; how it confronted the perils of political de-

mocracy in its struggle for survival against the narrow self-interests of the people it served? Shall we not immerse our young minds in the best insights of philosophical reasoning and then exhibit revelatory biblical theism with its timeless claim upon the mind and heart of humanity in all its generations? Why not teach our students logic and a respect for the universal significance of reason at the very outset of their studies? Why not, on a background of the timeless affirmations of Scripture, introduce them as well to what is best in the humanities and to the space-time tentativeness of modern science? Is there any longer a senior requirement that applies the claim of God the creator and redeemer and judge of life to the predicament of the self and of other selves who populate this wounded cosmos?

An associate of the Carnegie Foundation has suggested that just as colleges and universities have final graduating exercises, so they might also sponsor entrance dedicatory exercises that mark serious entry into the world of learning. It is a challenging idea indeed.

Is there anywhere an evangelical school not primarily driven by size and numbers, not given to the bait of diversity that attracts ever wider constituencies for the sake of student enrollment and financial support, even at the eventual cost of the school's doctrinal affirmations? Do these affirmations pose in the catalogue like some dust-covered monument from the remote past? Do they now count for less as a statement of faith or creedal commitment than do the swirling nebulous winds of contemporary evangelical opinion?

Is there a campus where evangelical professors are recognized in the extended world of learning for their prowess in particular fields of concentration? Are students excited by their professors' engagements in the secular arena that so desperately needs to know the relevance of a biblical faith? Do their professors take time to hone the God-given gifts of the younger generation? Are professors respected and revered not only for their academic contribution but also for their participation in the life of the church?

The student family and faculty community must reinforce one another in the Christian virtues, demonstrating a collegial

relationship that bonds administration, faculty, and students. Its goal will be the preparing of devout and culture-sensitive alumni who represent and can elucidate the cause of truth and right in an appealing and logically compelling way. The faculty will be spiritual and intellectual role models that students can emulate.

The needed reformation in evangelical education will not emerge under its own inherent initiative. It requires biblical incentive, volitional determination, intellectual insight, creative imagination, and sacrificial dedication. Thirty years ago evangelicals lost a golden opportunity to launch a great Christian university. Today not a few people are asking whether we can any longer launch even a modest evangelical college that is unswervingly true to the Protestant Reformation and that, if relatively small, can gain national respect for its academic achievement, its moral strength, and its spiritual vision.

There is no need to dream wild dreams of throngs of graduates confronting the forces of secularism and paganism, or graduating hundreds of Augustines, Calvins, and Wesleys. All we need to pray and work for is but one contemporary Augustine, one contemporary Calvin, one contemporary Wesley. Better yet, instead of trying to clone some past star let each student reach for God's image in Christ, each to be like Him and to serve Him to the full with his or her peculiar gifts. We need also to stimulate a highly qualified laity; the fact is, that all leaders of the Protestant Reformation were university trained and often had better academic credentials than did the clergy. Stemming the present tide is obviously not our responsibility alone; the future of America and of the West and of the Third World too, is in God's hands. But our role – and it is major – is to bring to this present hour minds and hearts illumined by God's mind and heart and knees bent before Him in intercession. Our calling is to obey, and to remember that His special intelligible revelation to a small people in a small sector of the ancient world became in His special providence the resource that lifted the West above its pagan mires. The dynamic power of that selfsame special intelligible revelation

remains available today to reverse contemporary neo-paganism as well, if we but release it to mold and maintain the vision of our evangelical schools and colleges.

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