

“Education To What End?”

Opening Convocation To The Students And Faculty Of Montreat College

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Ideas have consequences. [1]

The tangible effect of ideas became most clear to me in the fall of 1986 when I was a Lieutenant Junior Grade on the USS Rentz in the Sea of Japan, accompanied by two aircraft carriers, a battleship, and dozens of cruisers, destroyers, frigates, and submarines. The Soviets were predictably agitated when they discovered the presence of one of the most powerful armada ever to ply the Sea of Japan, and they deployed several ships and aircraft to harass us. My ship's mission was to keep Soviet ships away from the U.S. aircraft carrier Ranger.

One afternoon when I was Officer-of-the-Deck, a Soviet destroyer began bearing down on the Ranger. I ordered the second gas-turbine engine placed online so we would have maximum speed available, and then I ordered a collision course with the Soviet destroyer. As I stood on the starboard bridge wing, I felt the force of the wind pressing against my body, the salt air and acrid jet smoke burning in my nostrils, the throb of the engines in my feet, and the motion of the ship crashing through the sea. I prayed that my Russian counterpart would turn away. He did. I positioned the Rentz between the Russian and the Ranger, and we assumed a tense standoff that lasted for days.

The episode I have just described was a tiny piece of the Cold War, which was itself—even though over 40 years long—a brief saga in the multi-millennia-long struggle for the mind and soul of humanity. While serving in the Navy I was, in a small way, participating in a very real and serious contest of beliefs and ideas regarding the proper ends and means of human life. The Soviet Union was impelled by Marxism, and the United States was impelled by the ideals and assumptions underlying liberal democracy.

Maybe you are someone who thrills to tales of action and adventure. Or perhaps you are more like Bilbo and Frodo Baggins, J.R.R. Tolkien's hobbits who, being respectable and most interested in food, drink, and fellowship, do not seek adventure, but only reluctantly become participants in the struggle for Middle Earth. But like it or not, we are all immersed in the great drama of civilization, the effort to define what is real and how we should live.

If decisions about war and peace, human rights and responsibilities, and political and economic organization are, at least in part, based on the interplay of ideas about what is

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good, then it follows that the institutions established to support the development, understanding, preservation, and communication of those ideas are critical. Such is the role of colleges and universities.

If we then ask the question, “Education to what end?,” our answer will depend upon our answers to the great questions about the meaning and purpose of life, from which all the subordinate questions and answers flow. Across the ages, people have answered these fundamental questions in different ways, and the purposes and methods of education have changed accordingly. Let us now briefly trace some of the ways in which core beliefs have shaped the development of Western civilization, and likewise the development of education as we now know it.

The ancient world of Greece and Rome was pagan in its fundamental beliefs. People believed they were at the mercy of the gods, who were many, arbitrary, and powerful. The best one could do was to be clever in appeasing the gods. Odysseus, the hero in Homer’s *Odyssey*, was the archetype who cunningly played one god against another, but whose best efforts against, for example, the Cyclops or Scylla and Charybdis, still did not allow him to overcome fate, which had foretold that he alone of all his men would return to Ithaca. Honor was valued over life, such that a Spartan mother could say to her son, “Return with your shield [namely, with honor] or on it” [the Spartan way of returning the dead].

In the day-to-day world of these people, human life was tragic, cruel, and meaningless. In Sparta, the city council decided whether a newborn was big, strong, and healthy enough to live. If not, the baby was tossed off Mount Taygetus to shatter his or her helpless body, which would rot on the jagged rocks below. In the more individualistic Athens, unwanted babies were placed in clay pots and left at the temples of the gods to die from the elements or to be consumed by animals. [2]

Inequality was obvious in the way of things. Slavery was normal. In Rome if a slave killed his master, all of the slaves of that master were killed. In one case, some 400 innocent men, women, and children were executed because of the misdeed of one. [3] There was no sense of progress or direction in history, and no reason for hope; rather, life was a sad series of cycles, birth to death, and the endless repetition of seasons. And so life proceeded for many, many centuries.

Education in the pagan world focused on two main themes: physical training to prepare men for the ancient obligation of military service; and the study of the Muses, poets like Homer and Virgil, whose *Odyssey* and *Aeneas* were fundamental to the cultural tradition. The Greeks and Romans were interested in the development of heroic virtues and rhetoric (the ability to make moving speeches) because these were the essential skills for the building and governing of society. [4] The link between character

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development and the health and coherence of society was at the core of the educational enterprise. The “good” was defined in terms of personal virtue that abetted civic ends.

You might be wondering about the Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who are often considered the founders of the Western intellectual tradition. It is important to note that in their day, they did not win the debate over the proper ends of education. Socrates, remember, was executed for corrupting the youth and for impiety. His impiety lay in his philosophical search for the good, which undermined belief in the gods who animated Greek culture. [5] Socrates’ example teaches us that education can be a very dangerous activity indeed, and that what passes for truth in one’s own time may not be the final word.

Then along came Jesus, and Western civilization changed radically, but not all at once. In fact, it took centuries. There were millions of hearts and minds to change, over a vast area of territory ruled by the most expansive empire in the history of the West—one that persecuted those who refused to worship Caesar and the Roman gods.

Beginning with the Apostle Paul in his famous speech on Mars Hill, Christians brought to Athens, Rome, and the West the radical notions that there is but one God; that all nations are “made of one blood” [6] in the image of this living God and hence are imbued with meaning, significance, and personal dignity; and that we are called to love both God and our neighbors.

While some of the early Christians won converts by such disputations, David Bentley Hart tells us that many Christians “won renown principally for their sobriety, peacefulness, generosity, loyalty to their spouses, care for the poor and the sick, and ability, no matter what their social station, to exhibit . . . self-restraint, chastity, forbearance, and courage” in the face of persecution. For instance, the emperor Julian once remarked in a letter to a pagan priest:

It is a disgrace that these impious Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well. . . . It is [the Christians’] philanthropy towards strangers, the care they take of the graves of the dead, and the affected sanctity with which they conduct their lives that has done the most to spread their [faith]. [7]

By the fourth century, Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, more likely reflecting the progress of Christianity in the Roman Empire than that of his personal devotion. [8] Despite being known as a “violent, puritanical, ponderous, late Roman brute,” [9] Constantine did end the official persecution of Christians, thereby aiding the spread of the faith to much of Europe by the 7th century.

Christianity brought to the West a spiritual, cultural, and intellectual revolution of tremendous proportion. Christianity imbued human life with dignity—and hence, value—

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that made infanticide rare; that provided care to the poor, hungry, sick, lame, and elderly; that greatly increased the standing and rights of women; and that, over time, abolished gladiatorial games, human sacrifice, and slavery. Christianity created a new sense of the natural order and our place in it. No longer were people considered mere playthings of the gods; we now had dominion over the earth and all that was in it. The idea of having been created by a rational God made the natural order something to be discovered, and made discovery one means of worship. History now had purpose and direction.

Education in what had become Christendom changed to reflect the new answers to the fundamental questions. Initially Christians like St. Augustine adapted the Roman liberal arts tradition to Christian ends. Virtue was still the aspired end of education, but the definition of virtue was made compatible with Christianity. During the crumbling of Rome and through the “barbarian” invasions, Christianity kept learning alive in its monasteries. [10] The great colleges and universities of Europe took root and grew from these monasteries. Philosophy and the philosophers who had lost the debate in ancient Greece (Plato and, especially, Aristotle) enjoyed a better reception in Christian Europe than they had in their own time and place. The Reformation, with its emphasis on the accessibility of the Scriptures to lay people, made the extension of education to all classes a priority. Finally, science as we know it came to flower only in Christendom [11] and eventually found a fertile home in its universities.

Much of this history has unfortunately been lost or obscured in the West. The severe brutality of the ancient world and the revolution that Christianity affected are little known, understood, or appreciated, and have often been devalued or reinterpreted, beginning with the “Enlightenment” thinkers of the 17th century.

The so-called “Enlightenment” affected its own history-changing intellectual revolution, which led to phenomenal political, economic, and cultural transitions. In this case, both the ancient gods and the Christian God were displaced by a new god — Reason. [12] Reason, universal and accessible to all who sought after it in the fashion of Socrates, would elevate the philosopher to the place of ruler in all spheres of human activity. The corresponding political revolution replaced government based on the idea of aristocratic virtue, with government based on the individual person’s fear of violent death; in other words, reasonable people would agree to limitations on their freedom if the state would, in return, provide military protection from outsiders and police protection from other citizens. [13] Likewise, the economic revolution made a virtue of human nature’s inherent selfishness in a way that would cause people to be more productive. These political and economic revolutions were linked. In 1776, both the American Declaration of Independence and Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, the founding document of capitalism, were published. Through these two documents, political and economic freedom were joined to create liberal democracy and capitalism—first in America, then throughout the West.

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In the Enlightenment scheme for politics and economy, God’s role was greatly diminished because throughout Europe, the power of the church and tradition had to be broken to give Reason the sole authority to rule. Enlightenment thinkers, therefore, consciously worked to redefine matters of faith as being outside of the realm of knowledge—downgrading the status of faith to that of opinion only. [14]

Education would have to play an important role in a society ruled by Reason. Citizens would need to be prepared for their responsibilities, and scientists would need to be supported in their quest to tame all of nature for the benefit of humanity. Colleges and universities were critical in both areas as they equipped the teachers and leaders of the republic and trained and supported the scientists. The rule of Reason caused colleges and universities to grow and thrive as never before. Philosophy (the pursuit of truth) and science (once known as natural philosophy) became predominant within the university as never before. Thus, the cultivation of virtue as the leading “end” to be attained through education took a back seat and has largely withered away.

The American founders preserved a place for God—albeit one that was somewhat diminished—by grounding the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as an endowment of the Creator, Nature’s God, and by explicitly assuming that liberty in a republic required a virtuous citizenry—a virtue that could only be properly nurtured through religion. For a century in most cases and longer in some, education in America continued to honor God and to “furnish the mind” and heart with explicit references to the Bible. [15]

Then along came Karl Marx, who took political science a step further and expelled God entirely and predicted the demise of capitalism and liberal democracy through a revolution of workers against owners. Lenin and his Russian successors worked to advance that revolution through a series of activities that eventually led to my personal encounter with the Soviet Navy.

Unlike its Christian and pagan predecessors, which reigned for a millennia or more, the Enlightenment’s reign has been cut short by its own critique of its basic premises. While the political regimes, economies, and universities promoted by the Enlightenment live on, the soul of each has been eviscerated by the 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

Most educated Americans have heard that Nietzsche declared, “God is dead.” [16] Fewer know that Nietzsche did not kill God, but merely proclaimed what Enlightenment philosophers had already done. Nietzsche exposed the fact that the Enlightenment philosophers wanted to have their cake and eat it, too: they took from Christianity its basic assumptions regarding the dignity of the person and the rational, predictable organization of nature, along with the values that flowed from Biblical revelation (at least

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those they wanted), and then jettisoned the God who was the source of these fundamental commitments. Nietzsche mercilessly ripped this support out from under the Enlightenment philosophers.

Then he went a step further; Nietzsche killed Socrates (the icon of universal reason) all over again and, with Socrates, Reason and the underpinnings of Western rationalism. [17] Without God or the god-like power of disembodied Reason, there was nothing left on which knowledge could stand. All knowledge became relative. All values became subjective. All forms of political and economic organization became a means for some to exercise power over others.

Higher education, which was well along in exorcising God from its hallowed halls, was left in a state of crisis. [18] Without either God or Reason to validate its search for truth, without its former goal of cultivating virtue, what was it to do but teach us how to do things and to identify power relationships? This is the current state of post-enlightenment or post-modern thought.

In the practical world, Nietzsche’s legacy has been the denial of universal truth-claims in favor of a freedom to choose that, in its fullest flowering, renders meaningless any distinction “. . . between good and evil, compassion and cruelty, love and hatred...” [19]

Ideas do have consequences. Our ideas lead to our actions, which influence the ideas and actions of others. We must be clear about our ideas. We must be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is within us, but we must do so with gentleness and respect. [20] Let us remember, as did the early Christians, that our actions speak louder than our words.

Montreat College centers its education in Jesus Christ—a firm foundation and guide for life and reason, in which we find a meaningful freedom and dignity. Let us live humble lives of service. Join us in our meek attempt to be Christ-centered and service-driven, educating and equipping men and women to be agents of renewal, transformation, and reconciliation in a world that struggles to find meaning and purpose.

1. This sentence is a direct reference to Richard Weaver’s classic work *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) in which he argues that the catastrophes of our age are the product of unintelligent choice. The cure lies in the renewed acceptance of an absolute reality, in the right use of reason, and in the recognition that ideas—like actions—have consequences.

2. Christian Overman, *Assumptions That Affect Our Lives: How Worldviews Determine Values that Influence Behavior and Shape Culture* (Bellevue, WA: Ablaze Publishing Company, 2006), 38-40.

3. David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 122.

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4. Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986), 16-22.
5. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1986), 275.
6. Acts 17:26 (King James Version).
7. Julian, *Epistle 22*, quoted in Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 45, 154.
8. Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 42, 45, 100, 127-128.
9. Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 100.
10. See, for example, Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland’s Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1995) and Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers*, 49-51.
11. Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 63.
12. See Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 284-293, who addresses the Enlightenment project’s goal of rule by reason, and Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), Chapter 1, who discusses the need of education to serve a God or gods.
13. Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, 1651, originated this concept.
14. See, for example, Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), and Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 28.
15. The phrase “furnish the mind” and the role the Bible played in doing so within the American context comes from Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 56-60.
16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1891), Prologue, Part 2.
17. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 308.
18. See, for example, Norman Klassen and Jens Zimmerman, *The Passionate Intellect: Incarnational Humanism and the Future of University Education* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).
19. Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 23.
20. I Peter 3:15.

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