

THE TROJAN HORSE OF AMERICAN EDUCATION?

A Baccalaureate Address at St. Joseph's College; Collegeville, Ind., June 8, 1952

This address to a conservative Catholic college reflected an emphasis in God and Man at Yale, which had been published the previous fall, stirring up much controversy. I remained grateful to my supporters (see my reminiscences concerning Henry Regnery, April 12, 1972, and John Chamberlain, November 9, 1978). In this address I challenged the views of the president of Harvard, Dr. James B. Conant, who had expressed himself as opposed to education in private schools. I emphasized the encroachments of secular perspectives on learning and stressed the importance of conventional Christianity.

AS I LOOK about me, I see that you have made no particular effort to disguise the proceedings here this afternoon. Lots of people are in attendance—parents, alumni, benefactors, the leading citizens of Collegeville. The ceremony will probably receive generous mention in the local press. All in all, quite a to-do.

Yet if James B. Conant, dean of American college education and president of Harvard University, has right on his side, the ceremony we are participating in today ought to go underground. There shouldn't be anything brassy to commemorate the intellectual puberty of a regiment of young men who, by virtue of their education in a private school, promise to introduce into our society divisive and undemocratic influences.

That's what you're going to do, gentlemen of the graduating class. Dr. Conant says so. He spelled out his misgivings last April. True, he spoke specifically of private preparatory schools; but logic requires that private colleges—most especially denominational colleges like this one—fall under his indictment. We can only achieve unity, Dr. Conant insists, "if our public schools remain the primary vehicle for the education of our youth, and if, as far as possible, all the youth of a community attend the same school irrespective of family fortune or

cultural background. . . . There is some reason to fear," he continues, "lest a dual system of secondary education . . . come to threaten the democratic unity provided by our public schools. The greater the proportion of our youth who attend independent schools, the greater the threat to our democratic unity. . . ."

Less prominent men, but important men just the same, gleefully took up the cry. A Dr. Oberholtzer, speaking at the same conference, said, "It is the ideas or philosophy behind the nonpublic schools that are dangerous." The executive secretary of the American Association of School Administrators, a branch of the National Education Association, Dr. Worth McClure, added, "The denominational schools build prejudices, they build little Iron Curtains around the thinking of the people."

Now the American people are not, as a general rule, given to talking back to educators. We have been taught better. Education is good. More education is better. Still more education is better still. The more education we have, the sounder will be our judgment and the less we ought to be contradicted. Mr. Conant has had great gobs of education. His advice, generally speaking, ought to be worth many times our own.

Still, some undisciplined folk are inclined to tell Professor Conant to go take a ride on Charon's ferry. They simply don't agree that private education is necessarily divisive and undemocratic, and even to the extent that private education is not socially cohesive, they're not particularly concerned to foster the sort of unity Mr. Conant is interested in. In short, they want to know why Mr. Conant is attacking private education—especially since the record is clear that graduates of private schools, Mr. Conant included, have made and continue to make striking contributions to our society.

To understand Mr. Conant, it doesn't help to read his full statement, which treats mostly of the advantages of mixing rich and poor, Catholics and Jews, artists and farmers. All of us agree that the tolerance generated by mixing with people of diverse backgrounds and interests is all to the good—while perhaps rejecting Mr. Conant's intimations that this is the highest value of education. Yet none of us have spotted any marked intolerance coming out of private schools—

no more, certainly, than comes out of public schools. Nor are we convinced that there is less stratification within a public high school, or a state college, or a value-anarchistic private university like Harvard (where groups with common intellectual, cultural, racial, or religious interests tend to stick together) than there is in the private school or in the private denominational college. So why should a man whose most casual asides shake the foundations of the educational world come out and say such unreasoned and unfriendly things about the men and women who support private schools and send their children there?

The answer is that Dr. Conant, along with some powerful educational confreres, is out to fashion society in his own mold. The most influential educators of our time—John Dewey, William Kilpatrick, George Counts, Harold Rugg, and the lot—are out to build a New Social Order. And with a realism startling in a group of longhairs, they have set about their job in the most effective fashion. They don't dissipate their efforts on such frivolities as national elections (though they do this incidentally); they work with far more fundamental social matter, the student.

The chagrined and frustrated parent has very little luck opposing the advances of the New Social Order. "The consumer has no rights in the educational marketplace," Professor Henry Steele Commager puts it. Translated, this means that a parent has no right to seek reform regardless of the extent to which he disapproves of the net impact of the local school. The educator, in short, has consolidated his position as the exclusive, irresponsible regent of education. *L'école*, he says, *c'est moi*.

There is not enough room, however, for the New Social Order and religion. The New Order is philosophically wedded to the doctrine that the test of truth is its ability to win acceptance by the majority. Economically, the New Order is egalitarian; politically, it is majoritarian; emotionally, it is infatuated with the State, which it honors as the dispenser of all good, the unchallengeable and irreproachable steward of every human being.

It clearly won't do, then, to foster within some schools a respect for an absolute, intractable, unbribable God, a divine Intelligence who

is utterly unconcerned with other people's versions of truth and humorlessly inattentive to majority opinion. It won't do to tolerate a competitor for the allegiance of man. The State prefers a secure monopoly for itself. It is intolerably divisive to have God and the State scrapping for disciples.

Religion, then, must go. First we must expose religion as a not-very-serious intellectual and emotional avocation (see the famous 1945 Harvard Report's dismissal of religion: "... we did not feel justified in proposing religious instruction as a part of the curriculum. . . . Whatever one's views, religion is not now for most colleges a practicable source of intellectual unity.").

Next, we must prove that to allow religion to be taught in public schools imminently commits us to uniting Church and State (see the *McCullum* decision of the Supreme Court). Having paved the way, we can rely (always barring divine intervention) on the results. If religion is given no place at all—or just token recognition—in the intellectual diet of the school, the growing generation will probably come to think of it, as Canon Bernard Iddings Bell puts it, as "an innocuous pastime, preferred by a few to golf or canasta." When this happens, religion will then cease to be a divisive influence.

The fight is being won. Academic freedom is entrenched. Religion is outlawed in the public schools. The New Social Order is larruping along.

But there remains an enemy. An implacable Trojan Horse that threatens the uniform evolution towards the New Order. The private schools (outnumbered ten to one by public schools) are still measurably independent. And many of them are straightforwardly religious. So long as these schools survive, the public-education monolith is threatened.

How best to do away with them? The modern mind turns automatically to the State to do a job. Why not outlaw private schools? Dr. Conant is too realistic. The American mind is not yet conditioned to such heavy-handed federal action. Other means must be found.

Private schools are supported by private money. So why not expropriate private money? This campaign of attrition is already succeeding. The private colleges are in desperate shape. And many of

them are masochists of the first order: for the most part, they urge upon their students the evils of private property and the glories of egalitarianism. Quite predictably, these students graduate to urge higher and higher taxation on their political representatives, who comply by absorbing a greater and greater percentage of individual income, thus making less and less of it available for the maintenance of private colleges. The next step, clearly, is for our government to rush in with various species of federal grants to keep the schools from perishing.

But if "public" money is used to support an educational institution, certain requirements must be fulfilled. No classes on religion, of course, else you marry the Church to the State. And nothing too unkind about the State itself. Nor may the school indulge itself in its own admissions policy. In short, the acceptance of federal grants means the surrender of the school's independence.

Alongside an economic war against the private schools, a propaganda assault must be staged against them. The movement to discredit the private schools began, indirectly, a long time ago. The philosophers of egalitarianism and class hatred started to hack away at "private schools for young fops." The psychological groundwork has been laid, and the time is ripe for the direct onslaught.

Gentlemen, the enemies of private schools, the champions of academic freedom, refuse to think through the implications of education. Whereas they constantly talk about the search for truth, they refuse to face the implications of *finding* truth.

Dr. Charles Seymour, ex-president of Yale University, is often quoted as stating, "We shall seek the truth and endure the consequences." What, indeed, are the consequences of finding truth?

Presumably, they are twofold: The truth must be embraced, and its opposite must be scorned. Students must be encouraged to recognize and honor truth and to reject and battle its opposite.

Again, we must ask: How do we know when we have discovered truth or when we have, at least, discovered the nearest available thing to truth? The answer is that we can only know after canvassing alternatives and bringing our reflective faculties to bear on them. But once we have selected our truths—and each individual is entitled to select

his own truths—it becomes our duty to promote them as energetically as we can.

The overseers of the denominational schools, the patrons of our private nonsecular schools and colleges, believe they have found the truth in God and through God. It is their privilege and their duty to promote this truth as efficaciously as possible, through the medium of the classroom. When educators say that denominational schools “build little Iron Curtains around the thinking of the people,” they really mean that in their opinion the overseers of these denominational schools have selected not truth but error. Surely if they believed that denominational schools were teaching the truth, they would not brand them as Iron Curtain hangers. In short, gentlemen, after you strip away the circumlocutions and casuistry, you find yourself at point-blank range with what the proponents of the New Social Order really mean. They really mean that those people who disagree with their version of truth, who disagree that pragmatism, positivism, and materialism are the highest values, are in error. And, with characteristic intolerance towards differing creeds, they seek to liquidate their opponents by talking about such things as democracy and divisiveness.

You graduate into a turbulent and confusing and perverse world situation which, because so many men have forgotten the lessons of Christ and because so many men have turned their back on Him, seriously threatens the international ascendancy of evil: a physical war against Christian civilization, and an intellectual war against the foundations of our spiritual faith.

Leadership in the movement against the Antichrist is sorely needed; and yet the sternness and sacrifice and singleness of purpose which we must show to win the fight seem to be lacking in a good many of us. They are lacking, mostly, because of the easy and lazy optimism that has developed as a result of seeing over the centuries individual after individual, tribe after tribe, country after country discard their pagan beliefs in favor of Jesus Christ. We have come to feel that the truths of God are so intellectually and emotionally compelling that they are certain to triumph in the contest of ideas. And be-

cause of our faith in the organic attraction of Christianity, we are no longer fired with the resolution and zeal which characterized the small band of men whose willingness, nineteen hundred years ago, to sacrifice, to proselytize, and to teach is responsible for the fact that on Sundays we worship at the altar of Jesus Christ rather than at the altar of twentieth-century counterparts of Zeus and Athena and Apollo and Pluto.

Too many of us have fallen prey to the spurious logic best typified by a recent statement of Max Eastman, who labeled it "silly that two-legged fanatics should run around trying to look after a God whom they at once consider omnipotent and omniscient."

Gentlemen of the graduating class: It is not sacrilege to state that God needs your help. It is not vainglory to state that you can help God. It is not empty rhetoric to state that insofar as you help man, you help God; that insofar as you serve God, you serve man, and you serve yourself. And it is not Commencement Day bombast to remind you that knowledge of truth carries with it awful consequences, as well as sustaining joys.