

# SPIRITUALITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Patrick Keeney

When toward the end of his long life, John Kenneth Galbraith was asked what social change he had found most remarkable, he responded that it was the “decline of the Catholic Church as a critical institution in American life.”<sup>1</sup>

Whatever our views of organized religion, Galbraith’s larger point is difficult to deny. We are living at a time when the spiritual truths and ancient verities upon which our civilization have been built have crumbled away before the tribunal of reason and science. So even as our civilization progresses in many ways, there is a very real enervation of the spirit, as individuals struggle for meaning in a cold and impersonal universe. What is to be done?

As a point of entry into this debate, I want to borrow from a book by Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*.<sup>2</sup> Taylor points out that the achievements of modernity – by which he means the world from the 17th Century on – have come at a cost. So while it is undeniably true that the material conditions of living have greatly improved for the vast majority of peoples, the rise of science and the subsequent “disenchantment of the world”<sup>3</sup> pose a real challenge to human well-being. Older systems of meaning no longer resonate with us; the ancient rituals and symbols which once carried with them enormous significance have been stripped bare. There appears little in our world which cannot be subjected to a cost-benefit analysis.

For Taylor, reason has become instrumentalized, restricted to the service of science. Whereas thinkers of every previous age have stressed the importance of rational deliberation concerning how best we ought to live, in our own day reason has been confined to directing only the means of existence, never its ends. On the substantive question of *how*, ideally, we should live our lives, on what goals are worth pursuing, reason has been rendered silent.

Thus whatever values we choose to pursue are, to the degree that they are no longer tied to the rational faculties – entirely arbitrary. Traditionally, moral positions were said to be grounded either in reason or in the nature of things. Now, however, moral positions are “ultimately just adopted by each of us because we find ourselves

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<sup>1</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Life in Our Times*. Toronto: Random House, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity*. Toronto: Anansi, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Op. Cit. p. 3. Taylor borrows the phrase from Max Weber. Weber argued that the rise of capitalism, bureaucracy and the modern, rational-legal state had discredited older orders of meaning, particularly those supposedly based on a sacred origin. Such older orders gave meaning to the world and regulated the norms and rituals of social life; but the sacred myths which undergirded these orders were unable to withstand the onslaught of modern science and rational enquiry, and so became “disenchanted.”

drawn to them. On this view, reason can't adjudicate moral disputes."<sup>4</sup> Does one embrace a fundamentalist faith or philosophy? Should one dedicate oneself to good works or pursue a life of unending hedonism? Is it best to emulate the life of Nelson Mandela or The Marquis de Sade? All such ethical questions are laid on a Procrustean Bed, where the only answer we are able to give is that of the emotivist: it is really just a matter of individual preference and valuations, no different from the fact that some prefer chocolate ice-cream while others prefer vanilla. In the realm of values, reason is mute. Beyond the scientific realm, we no longer recognize objective truths.

And it needs to be emphasized that evaluations of any description -- whether moral, ethical, or aesthetic -- are understood as mere expressions of personal preference. Does one prefer Charles Dickens or Danielle Steele? Mozart or Motley Crue? The soup cans of Andy Warhol or a Carravagio?

According to Taylor, this "slide to subjectivism"<sup>5</sup> results in two insidious social effects. The first is that we have made self-fulfillment the holy grail of modern life.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, this "single-minded pursuit of self-development"<sup>7</sup> has created what the social critic Christopher Lasch called the "culture of narcissism".<sup>8</sup> Both these developments celebrate the individual at the expense of the community and social solidarity, and both encourage what might be called "social solipsism" (if such a thing is conceivable), where there is no "thou", but only the ever-present "I".

This narcissistic self-absorption (or self-indulgence) is the dark side to individualism, and it runs the danger of creating a society where, as Tocqueville famously remarked, each is "enclosed in his own heart"<sup>9</sup> and where individuals pursue their own private pleasures and satisfactions at the expense of the commonweal.

In broad strokes then, this is how Taylor rather pessimistically characterizes our current cultural situation. It is, of course, an analysis which is not without controversy. And it is easy to forget that the opposite of individualism is not necessarily a romanticized, communal solidarity, but very frequently the hysteria of the masses or the claustrophobia of the small town.

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<sup>4</sup> Op. Cit., p. 18

<sup>5</sup> Op. Cit., p. 55

<sup>6</sup> Our media is constantly filled with bizarre accounts of the lengths to which some individuals go in order to "find themselves." But what strikes one most forcibly about such modern accounts is that the notion of "finding oneself" is construed as a voyage of a subjective inner-movement, of "looking within". In contrast, for the Greeks knowing thyself was not the creed of the subjectivist, but rather a call to actively engage in community and in action, for it was only in the polis that one could truly come to know oneself. Modernity, by contrast, breaks the bonds of community, so that each of us, in his or her own solitary way, radically pursues our own good and idea of self-fulfillment, while denying our ties to others.

<sup>7</sup> Op. Cit, p. 57

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Toronto: Penguin Books, 2003.

But on one count of his indictment, I think Taylor is absolutely correct: we in the west, having voided all older systems of their meaning, are still left with an all too human yearning for seeking a higher meaning to our lives. We still possess the human longing to seek connection with a transcendent wider whole and a greater truth.

What has changed however – and radically so -- is that the conceptual resources available to us in the public realm preclude precisely this sort of enquiry. And it is at this juncture that I think education – and in particular university education -- must confront the hollowness of contemporary life.

But to do so, we need to recapture the essence of humanistic learning. In higher education, liberal learning is rapidly giving way to new forms of an industrialized utilitarianism where the only educational aims which we entertain as valid ones are those which are linked to the job market. We increasingly see education merely as a means to the economic end of securing employment; one pursues an “education” – not to wrestle with existential questions, or to discover how one ideally should live, or to ponder exemplary human possibilities – but in order to secure a job. Similarly, the notion of studying anything for its intrinsic value, for the sheer joy and pleasure that such study brings, is rapidly giving way to a new sort of industrial utilitarianism, where the only learning that is considered worthwhile is that which is directly linked to the economy.

In brief, I fear that we’ve allowed our once proud Canadian tradition of education to become a synonym for what, in a former age, was more accurately and more honestly called “job-training.” We conflate the educational mission of our schools with a vocational imperative, so that our schools, at every level from kindergarten to graduate school, are seen as institutions whose only mandate is preparing students for the job market. One of the unfortunate consequences is that our schools have become more and more concerned with credentials and diplomas, with providing students with marketable trades and skills, and less concerned with cultivating in students that same, pure, desire to know that Aristotle spoke of as the defining characteristic of the human condition.

But for some time I have detected in students a desire and thirst for what might be loosely termed “spiritual” kinds of knowledge and understanding, those understandings which ignore the values of the marketplace, and speak immediately and directly to the perennial human aspirations, imaginings and desires. Students long for visions of an exemplary way of life -- an understanding of what values and purposes are best worth pursuing and how such values might best be realized. And they deserve the chance to approach these questions in an organized and disciplined fashion.

In the mad rush to vocationalism in higher education, we are in danger of forgetting that there exists in all of us a desire for learning and knowledge that is not bound to the acquisition of marketable skills, and that this desire corresponds to a very noble part of our psychic makeup. Learning is, in and of itself, an intrinsically rewarding experience, one which makes us more fully and completely human.

Education is a notoriously vexed and contested concept. But its essence is perhaps best captured by Leo Strauss: “Education consists of learning to read what the best minds have said about the most serious questions.”<sup>10</sup> And no question is more serious than how one ought to live. For too long, we in higher education have allowed this question to be pushed to the margins. It is time that we once again afford it its central and time-honoured place.

Patrick Keeney is currently teaching in the School of Education at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, B.C. His email address is pkeeney@tru.ca .

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<sup>10</sup> Leo Strauss, “*What is Liberal Education?*” pp. 3-9, in Barrow and Keeney (eds.), *Academic Ethics*. London: Ashgate, 2006.