

## THE CRISIS OF MODERN LEARNING

By Carl F. H. Henry

**Editor's Preview:** It was Nathan Pusey, former president of Harvard, who remarked at commencement exercises a generation ago that "the least that can be expected" from a university graduate is that he or she "pronounce the name of God without embarrassment."

That minimum is no longer being met in America today, warns the distinguished theologian and current visiting professor at Hillsdale, Carl Henry.

Is man but a physically upright and mentally clever animal or does he bear the image, however tarnished, of a holy and merciful personal Creator?

Are we but complex creatures evolved from matter on an inconsequential planet, itself the product of an unconscious collision of blind forces; or is the universe the work of a solicitous Creator who summons us to entrust our well-being and destiny to Him?

Contemporary education, dominated by a cold naturalism and an illogical, shallow humanism, seems to evade such issues. In so doing, it shortchanges learning by trivializing truth and the good. It may even be endangering our survival as a society.

But signs of campus spiritual renewal are appearing, Dr. Henry says, with students, professors, and administrators all doing their part. The Christian Studies Program at Hillsdale College, for which this compelling lecture was delivered, is one notable example.

The most sudden and sweeping upheaval in beliefs and values has taken place in this century. No generation in the history of human thought has seen such swift and radical inversion of ideas and ideals as in our lifetime.

At the outset of this century the instructional program of the great Western universities frequently referred to the God of the Bible, the living self-revealing God. Courses in moral philosophy gave prominence to the Ten Commandments and to the Sermon on the Mount, and presented Jesus of Nazareth as the perfect example of



morality. Studies in social philosophy stressed that for history to attain a utopian future some change in man's inner disposition or character is necessary, if not because of original sin (which was increasingly questioned on evolutionary assumptions) then at least because of man's supposed inheritance of brute propensities and animal instincts.

By the late 1920s a striking shift of perspective had prevailed. References to deity no longer focused on the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the self-revelatory God of biblical theism, but rather on an anonymous God-in-general, a John Doe god. God was now inferred from the not-God. Philosophers of religion argued from the existence of the cosmos to a divine Cause, and/or from the design of nature or pattern of history to a divine Designer, and/or from human conscience to a divine Lawgiver, or from the mind of man to an Absolute Reason. Instead of the One God there emerged varieties of gods, both infinite and finite, personal and imper-

im•primis (im-pri-mis) adv. In the first place, from Latin *in primis*, among the first things...

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sonal, even growing gods. Naturalists, meanwhile, dismissed God entirely except as but a convenient symbol for man's supreme social or private values. Faced by this vanishing theoretical consensus, American educators abandoned the concept of God as the integrating factor in modern university learning.

Instead of God, shared moral values became the cohesive force in liberal arts studies. This emphasis on ethical norms was not, however, associated with biblical imperatives and divinely revealed commandments. Man's distinctive nature, it was said, requires a hierarchy of values that in preserving material realities subordinates them to ethical duties; these ethical duties, however, may or may not in turn require spiritual or theological illumination.

The shift of educational perspective concerned not only the vision of God and of moral imperatives, but also the nature of the dawning future and the means of implementing utopia. No longer was an internal change in man's nature or character considered necessary, and especially not the supernatural regeneration of fallen man on which Christian theism insisted. Instead education, politicization and socialization of the human race were to be the catalysts of a new age. Western learning would be carried to the ends of the earth, democratic ideals would be exported to all the nations, and the realities of human brotherhood in one world would facilitate the triumph of universal peace and justice.

#### No Place for God?

Today much of that kind of thinking is gone. No significant place remains for God or the gods in the

university classroom. Courses in science and in history dismiss deity as irrelevant. Psychology texts usually introduce God only as a psychic aberration. Even some religion departments still rumor the "death of God." Philosophy departments are in the grip of post-positivistic analysis and tend to sidestep supernatural concerns; others disown the supernatural and creatively restructure ultimate reality. The literature department alone seems at least to reflect the great theological concerns in a literary context.

In the absence of unrevisable absolutes, universities vainly expected that common values would nonetheless integrate modern learning. What we actually have is a normless tolerance of diversity, of deviation which is linked with a democratic outlook and often with respect for minorities; moral absolutes are associated only with totalitarian bureaucracies. A relativistic morality given to self-assertion lampoons the truth that tolerance without norms destroys even tolerance and that democracy without norms invites chaos.

Not only have the pluralistic gods and shared moral values become pale ghosts of the campus, but confidence has broken down as well in education and politics as dynamic catalysts of social change. Instead of reliance on orderly means of social change, including respect for law and deference to established conventions, the mood of contemporary social transformers is increasingly open to revolutionary coercion and violence as the preferred alternatives that assure rapid and radical alteration.

Meanwhile education itself succumbs to pressures to curtail the humanities, a course that would even more abridge the already reduced common intellectual experience of students. These pressures come not only from the side of the physical sciences which are now the *sine qua non* of modern learning, but also from the vocational needs of students. The liberal arts have impoverished themselves by their neglect of enduring spiritual concerns and by their studied exclusion of Judeo-Christian perspective in a radically secular age.

The drift of twentieth-century learning can be succinctly summarized in one statement: instead of recognizing Yahweh as the source and stipulator of truth and the good, contemporary thought reduces all reality to impersonal processes and events, and insists that man himself creatively imposes upon the cosmos and upon history the only values that they will ever bear. This dethronement of God and enthronement of man as lord of the universe, this eclipse of the supernatural and exaggeration of the natural, has precipitated an intellectual and moral crisis that escorts Western civilization despite its brilliant technological achievements ever nearer to anguished collapse and atheistic suffocation.

#### Naturalism, the New Orthodoxy

The shaping ideas of contemporary university learning can be readily identified. Its key concepts are dependency, transiency, relativity, and autonomy. These terms have

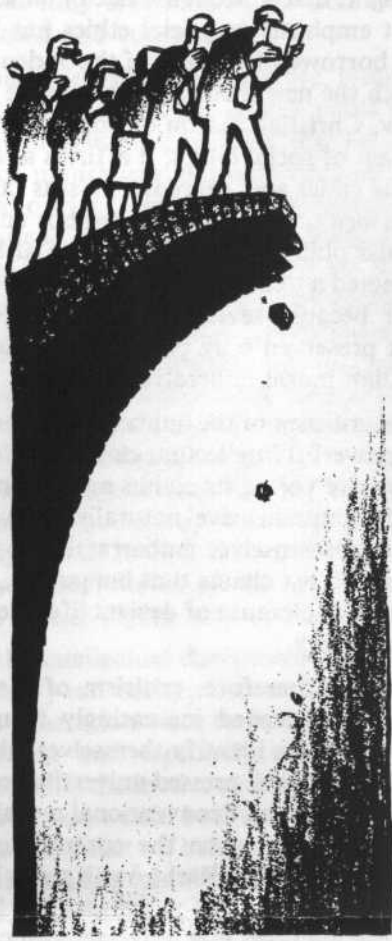
#### About the Author

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Dr. Henry has taught and lectured in colleges, seminaries, and forums throughout the United States and on every continent of the globe. He is the author or editor of some 40 books, capped by his masterful six-volume *God, Revelation, and Authority*.

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Carl Henry delivered this presentation at Hillsdale College in September 1983 as part of a Christian Studies convocation entitled "*Imago Dei: A Christian Vision of Man*."



always had a proper place in the explanation of man and the world, and all the more so in a generation that knows the space-time universe to be immensely older and immensely larger than even our grandparents suspected. But what distinguishes the modern view is its antitheological and antisupernatural stance. The modern view affirms *diffuse* dependency, *total* transiency, *radical* relativity, and *absolute* autonomy.

In affirming the independence of God, classical education denied the comprehensive contingency of all reality: the Creator of the universe has the ground of his being in himself, that is, has *aseity*, whereas the universe in its totality is dependent upon its Maker and is pervasively contingent. The current view, by contrast, depicts all reality as a matrix of contingency; all existence reduces ultimately to nature in some form, that is, to physical processes and events.

Earlier education affirmed, further, the reality of an eternal spiritual and moral world grounded in the supernatural being of God; it denied that reality is completely in the clutch of time. By contrast the current view affirms the transiency of the whole of existence. The biblical conception of an eternal Logos who shaped all worlds it considers mythology and without explanatory importance. All that exists, we are told, bears an expiration date; man and beast alike move toward death as their final destiny.

Earlier education affirmed that truth and the good are fixed and final; it denied that right and wrong are culture-relative. The current view, on the other hand, asserts that all ideas and ideals are relative to culture: all ethical imperatives, all philosophical pronouncements, all theological doctrines, are partisan prejudices of the socio-cultural matrix. It rejects outright eternal and revealed truths, divinely given commandments, unrevisable religious doctrines.

Given this emphasis on the culture-relativity of truth, certain other tenets of the current view seem somewhat arbitrary, for example, its confident dogmas of complete contingency and total transiency. The fact is, that a consistent espousal of culture-relativity would lead not to such speculative finalities, but to skepticism, since pervasive dependency and total transiency would be doctrines rooted in our own particular cultural perspective.

But the current view also affirms, aggressively so, the absolute autonomy of man. Its test of whether modern man has truly "come of age" turns on whether one repudiates all external, objective, and transcendent authority, and affirms instead the ultimacy of personal decision and creative selfhood. Man is considered his own lord in the area of truth and morals; the only values that the cosmos and history will ever bear, in the current view, are those that man himself insinuates into the course of events.

These premises have become the masked metaphysics, the covert conceptuality of modern liberal learning. Almost every sampling of student reaction to liberal arts studies in the mainstream colleges and universities in the last decade evokes the overwhelming verdict that recent students considered themselves intellectually constrained to shape their worldview by these controlling emphases which so authoritatively permeate classroom teaching and discussion.

This naturalist outlook notably differs from the atheistic Communist view only in secondary details, rather than in basic assumptions. The official teaching of Communism is that nature and history are objectively structured by a pattern of economic determinism, a determinism that assures the ultimate triumph of the proletariat. Free-world naturalism, by contrast, views this claim as pure mythology, and considers nature and history instead to be intrinsically unpatterned. But both perspectives are equally antitheological, both repudiate a divinely-given truth and morality, and both reject a supernatural purpose in nature and history. While Communism views the state as the authoritative stipulator of truth and right for the collectivity of mankind, free-world naturalism on the other hand elevates creative individual selfhood.

It is a fact, of course, that the present student generation is less idea-oriented than job-oriented. Some reports estimate the number of seriously intellectual students at only ten percent. Some improvement is under way as

women students aspire to careers in medicine, law and other professions long dominated by men. As other coveted vocational opportunities presuppose academic competence, serious students competing for scholarships are once again returning to long-forsaken libraries. Scholars who consciously accept the naturalistic worldview are frequently encouraged by their mentors to pursue graduate studies and to become university teachers. Among most students, the pressures of naturalistic theory serve actually to dull the force of the inherited Judeo-Christian view or at very least to postpone individual commitment to its high moral and spiritual demands.

What specially attracts liberal arts students to naturalism is its emergence in the form of humanism, a philosophic system that adds to the naturalistic agenda a program of social ethics. Humanism emphasizes not only man's duties to his fellow man and to nature, but also certain expectations from his fellow man and from nature. Human beings ought to champion social justice, promote human rights and racial equality and be concerned, we are told, about poverty; they ought, moreover, to preserve natural resources and avoid polluting the cosmos. Humanism emphasizes also certain human expectations from nature, which is assumed somehow to uphold personal worth and security. Although most secularists abandon any expectation of individual immortality, some have assigned their bodies to deep freeze at death in the hope that science in the next century will be able to retrieve them for endless life on earth.

#### **Parking-Lot Hypocrisy**

This correlation of a humanist agenda of social ethics with a naturalistic worldview has been attacked from right and left as a philosophical monstrosity that defies logical consistency. A system that denies that personality has decisive significance in the origin of the universe and considers personality but an accidental by-product of blind and unthinking forces can hardly affirm that nature specially defers to man or that man is bound by enduring duties. The consistent outcome of naturalistic theory is not a special status for mankind but the essential purposelessness and meaninglessness of human existence.

The inconsistency of the humanist is perhaps most apparent in his existential response when he is wronged by a fellow human being. If a humanist professor at New York University were to park his new Jaguar in a parking lot and to discover upon returning that an unknown driver had done massive damage to the side of his car, he would predictably not offer a public eulogy to the latest defector from objective values who, having emerged from ethical adolescence, now considered all ethical imperatives culturally relative and creative selfhood to be decisive for morality. Far from it. He would, instead, suddenly inherit a vocabulary with eschatological overtones that his naturalistic metaphysics does not logically accommodate.

From the right, that is, from the side of biblical theism, the humanist emphasis on social ethics has long been assailed as a borrowed fragment of the Judeo-Christian heritage which the new theorists were unable completely to disavow. Christian theism by contrast affirms not only a program of social ethics; it affirms also an agenda of personal ethics and, moreover, insists that love for God holds priority over love for neighbor and for self. Modern secular philosophy, as D. Elton Trueblood contended, promoted a "cut-flower civilization," one destined to wither because severed from its biblical roots; moreover, it preserved only preferred remnants of the Judeo-Christian moral imperative.

Evangelical criticism of the humanist program was not, however, a powerful intellectual classroom force. Only a minority boldly voiced its claims against the counterpressures of comprehensive naturalism. Evangelicals, moreover, were themselves embarrassed by propagandistic fundamentalist claims that humanists, in view of their atheism and tolerance of deviant lifestyles, were the enemies of morality.

More recently, therefore, criticism of the illogic of humanism has proceeded increasingly from the left. Radical students who identify themselves with the naturalistic worldview have pressed university professors to defend their espousal of "conventional morality" in the realm of social ethics given the controlling tenets on which humanism rests. As Karl Löwith remarks, naturalism provides no real basis for man to feel "at home" amid statistical averages in a universe born of an explosion. A cosmos in which personhood emerges only as an oddity and as an accident cannot sustain as its primary value an agenda of man's objective duties to nature or to his fellow beings. The consistent implication of naturalism is that man does not matter and that nature has no special place for personality.

#### **The Inescapable Revelation**

The humanist modification of naturalism to accommodate an agenda of social ethics is evidence enough that while naturalism as a metaphysical system is thinkable, it is not humanly livable—because naturalism dissolves the worth and meaning of human survival.

The reason humanism adjusts naturalistic beliefs experientially to universal ethical imperatives is that like every other human being the humanist is related to a larger realm of being and life and value, one that he neither creates nor controls. He cannot wholly escape God in his revelation nor wholly suppress the claim of the *imago Dei* upon his psyche. He is informed about inescapable moral obligation far more than the naturalistic theory implies. The New Testament clearly affirms that the Logos of God lights every man (John 1:9) and that the revelation of the Creator penetrates to the very being of even those who would suppress or excise that disclosure (Rom. 1:18 ff., 2:14 f.). Despite his intellectual and moral revolt against the supernatural, fallen man

is unable to fully free himself of God's counterclaim upon his mind and conscience.

The humanist perspective, therefore, is nurtured in part by hidden resources. At the crucial point of the nature and destiny of man the humanist forsakes the consistent demands of naturalism and incorporates instead alternatives that only a theistic view can coherently and adequately sustain. The Bible clearly illumines the tension that besets the humanist's refusal to opt either for thoroughgoing naturalism or for thoroughgoing theism. On the one hand the universal general revelation of God, in which the humanist shares, explains his concessions and departures from a consistent naturalistic account of man and the world; on the other, spiritual rebellion or sin explains his theoretical exclusion of the supernatural. The humanist seeks to suppress God's claim but cannot wholly eradicate it. Like all other human beings he stands perpetually related to God in his self-disclosure and cannot totally obscure the *imago Dei* that by creation stamps man with special dignity and worth.

Given the intellectual dominance of naturalism in the contemporary university, one would expect that if ever a student generation were to be wholly lost to a supernatural faith, and especially to the Judeo-Christian heritage with its distinctive revelatory claim, the present collegiate masses would be doomed to that fate. Yet it is one thing to say that on balance the university classroom most influentially promulgates the view that impersonal processes and events comprise the ultimately real world, and quite another to say that atheistic naturalism, whether humanist or nonhumanist, has captured the student mind.

### In the Steps of Augustine and Lewis

While most students, even many who pursue studies in philosophy, delay any serious wrestling of metaphysical concerns, there are tens of thousands in the American evangelical movement whose personal faith in Christ and commitment to Christian theism date back to high school and university. Their exposure to Judeo-Christian realities came not in connection with classroom studies, but mainly on the margin of formal studies, through association with fellow students whose devotional vitality and moral dedication contrasted notably with the spiritual apathy and ethical permissiveness prevalent on the secular campus.

In large part ecumenical student activity had waned because of concessions to the speculative climate; doctrinal and evangelistic concerns were replaced by radical socio-political protest. But evangelical movements like Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, Young Life, and Navigators left their mark despite contrary academic pressures. Even on mainstream secular campuses scores and then hundreds of students emerged to witness that they had found the crucified and risen Christ a living reality and now treasured the Bible as God's written Word. Like Augustine they declared that

the presuppositions of secular philosophy are not necessarily infallible, and with disarming confidence spoke of supernatural realities and staked their lives on the eternal verities. Like C. S. Lewis, they affirmed that one can be *Surprised by Joy* in an intellectual climate hostile to or oblivious of God and literate only about space-time relativities.

To be sure, the evangelical resurgence reflected for some perhaps little more than a semipopular interest in ideas. The electronic church was led in large part by charismatic personalities more gifted in inspirational than in theoretical and apologetic concerns. Religious booksellers capitalized on the conservative advance by promoting bestseller works dwelling on personal experience, doctrinal controversy, eschatological speculation, and the like. Evangelists established universities as rivals to secular institutions.

The Christian day school movement zoomed into high gear, often depicting public schools as essentially godless and amoral, even as champions of public schools often depicted private schools as elitist and racist. Newly formed evangelical universities often portrayed the secular campus as essentially atheistic and permissive in perspective, a judgment whose severity went far beyond that of long-established American evangelical colleges. For the latter, the recovery of secular institutions for traditional theistic commitments remained an objective.

In such a climate of extremism secular educators tended to dismiss the growing evangelical movement as an emotion-ridden aberration too intellectually impoverished to endure. They continued to regard humanism as the firmly entrenched and quasi-official philosophy of the secular campus.

There are indications, however, that this verdict seriously misreads the facts. For one thing, the most recent Gallup poll indicates that spiritual interest on the part of university students has not run its course but remains a campus phenomenon. Four in five students consider religious beliefs important, two in five attend religious services weekly, one in three affirm that their religious commitments are deepening rather than weakening. While this religious inquiry takes a variety of turns, and includes an interest in cults like Hare Krishna and the Unification Church as well as in Islam and all branches of the Judeo-Christian movement, evangelical concerns still remain prominently at the center of the movement.

Meanwhile, more and more spokesmen from within the secular universities lament the decline of interest in the humanities and the attrition of educational core content that increasingly deprives students of a shared academic experience. They also fault the campuses for indifference to the persistent problems of philosophy, among them the reality of God and the objectivity of moral imperatives. As Stephen Muller, president of Johns Hopkins, puts it, the universities may be producing a generation of "highly skilled barbarians."

A further sign of continuing spiritual resurgence is the fact that three recent leaders of the American Philosophical Association, in their presidential addresses, placed the subject of Christian theism once again on the agenda of the society. From within the APA has emerged a Society of Christian Philosophers which will soon publish a thought journal. The Institute for Advanced Christian Studies has begun issuing ten paperback texts at junior-college level; written mostly by professors at Big Ten and other mainline universities, the series gives Christian perspective on various liberal arts disciplines. Evangelical texts are appearing also in philosophy and theology that underscore the importance of Christian theism for the intellectual as well as social life of the culture and reach beyond empirical and historical methodology in probing ultimate reality. A growing confluence of literature by Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant scholars is now emerging as well; in a secular society whose pluralism lacks purpose and whose normless tolerance invites chaos it is reaffirming the importance of biblical convictions and values.

### Educators Facing Judgment

Modern liberal learning is at a decisive crossroads. In accepting the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put the issue bluntly: "If I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous Revolution that swallowed up some sixty million of our people," he said, "I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: 'Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.'"

This forsaking of God Solzhenitsyn proceeded to identify as "the principal trait of the entire twentieth century.... The entire twentieth century is being sucked into the vortex of atheism and self-destruction." It is one thing, he observed, that millions of human beings "have been corrupted and spiritually devastated by an officially imposed atheism"; it is another, hardly less disconcerting, that "the tide of secularism...has progressively inundated the West" so that "the concepts of good and evil have been ridiculed."

It "has become embarrassing to appeal to eternal concepts, embarrassing to state that evil makes its home in the individual human heart before it enters a political system," Solzhenitsyn remarked; "the meaning of life in the West has ceased to be seen as anything more lofty than the 'pursuit of happiness.'"

Judgment for this eclipse of spiritual realities and for preoccupation with the space-time problematics of nature must fall more severely on us educators than upon our students; indeed, students now often excel their pro-

fessors in probing the transcendent world. Whether this interest will be permanently shunted to the edge of the classroom is simply another way of asking whether the world of liberal learning is willing to restore academic visibility once again to the priority of God and to ethical imperatives.

At a meeting of the American Association of University Professors shortly after Watergate, some members proposed a resolution condemning the political amorality that precipitated the national scandal. The proposal was quickly withdrawn, however, when someone observed that all major Watergate personalities had attended universities whose faculties are affiliated with A.A.U.P.

If the role of professors does not extend beyond social criticism to involve perpetual vigilance in grappling with and clarifying influential ideas and ideals, are we not accountable, at least in part, for a nation's loss of integrity and moral cohesion?

Is man but a physically upright and mentally clever animal or does he bear the image, however tarnished, of a holy and merciful personal Creator? Are we but complex creatures evolved from matter on an inconsequential planet itself the product of an unconscious collision of blind forces, or is the universe the work of a solicitous Creator who summons us to entrust our well-being and destiny to Him? Does human existence move only toward cessation of life or are there, in fact, transcendent finalities and ultimate destinies in the offing? Contemporary education seems to escape, if not to evade, such issues and in so doing, shortchanges learning by trivializing truth and the good.

While the verdict that intellectuals give on God and the good may not decide the ultimate destiny of contemporary culture, it will nonetheless judge their competence as intellectual and moral analysts to whom are entrusted the fortunes of oncoming generations. When the Roman Empire collapsed in ignominious ruin, it was not the nobles and sages who perpetuated the moral fortunes of the West but rather the scattered people of God who lived according to spiritual and ethical imperatives. What may well be at stake in the crisis of modern learning is not simply the significant survival of society but especially the significant survival of the university. Academia must recover the conviction and promulgation of shared values, of which in the West that of God has been supreme above all. Unless it does so, the fading space-time relativities will by default replace what was once the vision of God and of the good, and will doom man to mistake himself and his neighbor for passing shadows in the night, transient oddities with no future but the grave.



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