

AlbertMohler.com

America's Educational Crisis—A Christian Response

The American educational system is in an undeclared state of disaster, with competing ideologies and shifting worldviews undermining the very nature of education itself. In the state controlled school systems, ideologies of naturalism, secularism, materialism, and moral relativism shape the prevailing culture and worldview. A pernicious new imposition of "tolerance" as an ideology threatens to silence all voices resistant to absolute relativism. Herbert Marcuse, the radical philosopher of tolerance from the 1960s, would no doubt be thrilled to know that his ideology of intolerant tolerance has become so dominant.

Tuesday, August 17, 2004

The American educational system is in an undeclared state of disaster, with competing ideologies and shifting worldviews undermining the very nature of education itself. In the state controlled school systems, ideologies of naturalism, secularism, materialism, and moral relativism shape the prevailing culture and worldview. A pernicious new imposition of "tolerance" as an ideology threatens to silence all voices resistant to absolute relativism. Herbert Marcuse, the radical philosopher of tolerance from the 1960s, would no doubt be thrilled to know that his ideology of intolerant tolerance has become so dominant.

At every level, the educational system bears all the marks of political and ideological battle. In the elite academy, various strains of postmodernism are at war with each other, even as various feminists, multiculturalists, and ideological theorists engage in academic battle.

Literature has been debased by postmodernist deconstruction, and texts are now treated as platforms for political posturing. According to French deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida, the author of the text is to be treated as "dead," meaning that it is now the reader, rather than the author, who will determine the meaning of the text. Of course, this means that there is no discernable meaning of the text at all. Michel Foucault—the radical postmodern philosopher of sexual liberation and polymorphous perversity—is now among the most influential figures in the academy, even though the living-out of his theories led to his death from AIDS.

From kindergarten to graduate school, education has been transformed from a process of learning into an opportunity for enhanced self-esteem. This is the gift of the therapeutic worldview which seeks to psychologize all issues and reduce questions of objective fact to matters of individual feeling.

Not even science is immune from these subversive developments. The politicization and ideological corruption of scientific fields was made embarrassingly apparent in the so called "Sokal scandal" of the 1990s, in which a prominent scientist wrote an article filled with undiluted postmodern gibberish—only to have it published in a major academic journal. The fact that his practical joke was taken seriously by the academic culture indicates the corruption and debasement of the scientific endeavor. An even more ominous development is the separation of science and morality, with "progress" in science becoming the only moral mandate recognized by some researchers and their supporters. Controversies over embryonic stem cell research and human cloning indicate the complete collapse of a shared worldview among scientists.

The separation of fact and value is one of the central features of the contemporary academic landscape. As Professor J. Budziszewski of the University of Texas notes, "We know as a matter of fact what the weight of a cesium atom is, but we are told that a judgment that murder is evil is simply a matter of opinion with no factual basis." Thus, we are told to look to science as a way of knowing "objective" truth, but we are then instructed that there can be no objective reality when it comes to matters of morality. This goes a long way toward explaining why a university professor would recently lament the fact that his students were reluctant to identify the Nazi atrocities in the Holocaust as "evil." A worldview that no longer recognizes evil for what it is has itself become an instrument of evil.

How can we recover a concept of authentic education? The Christian response to this question will be very different from that offered by alternative worldviews. As the psalmist instructs us, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” [Psalm 111:10]. Our worldview begins with the existence of the one true God, who has revealed himself to us, and who alone has the authority to determine what is true and false, good and evil, right and wrong. Thus, a Christian understanding of education is rooted in a worldview that takes the world seriously, because we first acknowledge the Creator of the universe. We understand that all education is moral education because we know that morality is not a mere human invention—it is the very structure of creation itself and the very substance of God’s revelation to his creatures.

Yet, as T. S. Eliot lamented, our contemporary tragedy is not just that Christians do not think, but that they do not think in anything recognizable as Christian categories of thought. The evaporation of the Christian worldview—even among Christians—is one of the greatest tragedies of our time and one of the greatest obstacles to Christian recovery and the reassertion of a Christian concept of education in our era.

Harry Blamires, writing over three decades ago, commented simply: “It is difficult to speak of the loss of the Christian mind in this generation without sounding hysterical.”

The Bible presents a model of education that begins with the knowledge of God and then extends to a knowledge of God’s law and the created order. All objects of knowledge and disciplines of study are made meaningful by the fact that God has created an intelligible universe that he intended his creatures to understand, at least in part. As historian Herbert Butterfield reminded us, the Christian concept of an intelligible universe is the one essential explanation for why modern science arose in the European context, rather than somewhere else.

In an age of encroaching barbarism, now is the time for the Christian church to reassert and reclaim its educational role and responsibility. The early Christians adopted Greek and Roman educational models and transformed them into an early Christian culture of learning. The church learned to teach through the catechetical schools that instructed new believers in the rudiments of the faith. As the church grew in numbers and maturity, formalized educational systems were developed, and the Christian church became the great engine for educational advance.

In the medieval era, the church gave birth to the university, an institution of learning based on confidence in the unity of all truth. The absence of this confidence explains the implosion of today’s universities into a morass of diversities, lacking any common moral understanding or body of knowledge. Building on Old Testament precedents, the Christian church understood education to be an essential task and responsibility, not only for children and new converts, but for all members of the community. The massive expansion of educational opportunities over the last several centuries was driven by Christian conviction and a vision of Christian influence in the larger society.

The Bible teaches clearly that parents bear the first and most fundamental responsibility for the education of their children. Informed Christian parents may partner with others in this great task, but this parental responsibility cannot be given to others as a franchise. Faithful Christian parents may choose from among a number of educational options, but the failure to exercise parental responsibility is an option foreclosed from the beginning.

Churches must also be involved in this recovery, developing ministries that partner with parents, encourage the development of Christian alternatives, and instruct the entire congregation about the centrality of the educational task.

A Christian concept of education is rooted ultimately in the revelation of God and the belief that God’s Word is real truth, true truth, and eternal truth.

Our Christian responsibility is not completed when we have come to terms with the current secular disaster and described its consequences—not by a long shot. Our responsibility is to remind and instruct parents of their urgent responsibility, to motivate churches to action and faithful response, and to reawaken the Christian mind in this generation. If we fail at this task, generations to follow will know darkness rather than light and ignorance rather than wisdom—and it will be our fault.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.