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THE ENDURING VALUE OF A CHRISTIAN LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

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The relationship between the Christian faith and the collegiate academy has long been the subject of vigorous debate. In recent years, many have weighed in with books, op-eds, position papers, and online debates. Topics of these discussions range from the place of Christian organizations on state-funded public university campuses to debates about the viability of faith-based approaches to scientific inquiry. These debates typically break down along well-established lines.

The conversation tends to be framed by those who advocate the separation of religion from public life or by those who make one-dimensional assertions about the primacy of vocational learning. Christians often find themselves in a defensive posture in order to promote the educational and social value of Christian thought and tradition. Rarely, however, does someone from outside the Christian tradition offer a potent apologetic for the value of Christian higher education.

This is why Anthony T. Kronman's book *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (Yale University Press, 2007) stands out in the literature. Throughout the book, Kronman, a former dean of Yale Law School who currently teaches in Yale's Directed Studies Program, provides an insider's indictment of the hollow core of secular higher education. In sum, he argues that, as the natural and social sciences were purged of all their moral and theological presuppositions, the humanities became the lone venue within academia for any serious discussion of the meaning of life. And, according to Kronman, as the basic assumptions of secular humanism have come under attack, the idea of any common

aspect of human nature is now seen by many as implausible, leading to a widespread inability of secular institutions to teach the meaning of life.

Kronman's book is part of a growing body of work that describes how higher education has lost its way, and these critiques highlight an academic environment in which Christian liberal arts institutions have become more valuable than ever, thanks to their ability to educate the whole person within the context of a comprehensive ethical and educational framework. To understand the unique place and value of the Christian liberal arts within higher education, a brief review of Kronman's main point is in order.

THE AGE OF PIETY

Kronman argues that the history of education in the United States, with regard to teaching the meaning of life, can be divided into three periods. The first period, which he calls the "age of piety," began with the founding of Harvard in 1636 and lasted until the beginning of the Civil War. American colleges throughout this period not only integrated the question of the meaning of life into every facet of their curriculum but also did so with an explicitly Christian worldview. Christ was acknowledged as sovereign over all creation, and all knowledge was understood as emanating from this starting point.

A review of the founding of Harvard shows that the college began as two things: an academically rigorous institution and a distinctively Christian one. Nearly all of Harvard's founders had been educated at Cambridge or Oxford, and, as one might expect, their own education served as a model for the college they built. These Puritan divines were clearly focused on what they saw as the goal of higher education: the shaping of students' souls.

So while Harvard's graduates would enter a variety of careers, their time on campus was not focused on professional training or the mere transmission of knowledge. In Kronman's words, Harvard was "above all a place for the training of character, or the nurturing of those intellectual and moral habits that together form the basis for living the best life that one can" (p. 49). The students were seen as individuals whose minds *and* souls would be shaped during their years on campus.

Harvard was not the only college with this view of its mission. Most American colleges during this 230-year period had a similar focus. Thus, Kronman calls it the "age of piety." It can also be understood as the golden era of Christian education.

THE AGE OF SECULAR HUMANISM

Kronman's second period lasted roughly one hundred years, from the end of the Civil War through the late 1960s. During this period, although faculty members continued to maintain the moral authority and confidence needed to lead students to think deeply about the meaning of life, they gradually eliminated God as ground zero. Kronman calls this period the "age of secular humanism" and suggests that within its first fifty years, the way was paved for the complete destruction of the way things had been done for two centuries prior.

One of the major factors driving this change was the rise of the German model of scientific research, which was imported to American educational institutions. This new method of education was centered on research and the quest to produce new knowledge; no longer was it deemed sufficient to study the brightest and most influential thinkers of the previous two millennia. Colleges and universities moved away from a curriculum that assumed a divine Sovereign as the starting point for education, and toward curricula based on the sovereignty of the human mind and its freedom to chart its own course. The effect was the demise of a "prescriptive" curriculum, along with the rise of academic specialization.

Eventually, as the natural and social sciences were purged of all their moral and theological presuppositions, the humanities, by default, became the lone venue for any serious discussion of the meaning of life. I say "by default" because it was the only major branch of the academy that did not aggressively pursue value-free education. Although many faculty in the humanities abandoned normative teaching, the discipline as a whole did not demand that they do so.

Further, to proponents of secular humanism such as Kronman, it is possible, even preferable, to explore the meaning of life without religious foundations. Meaning and purpose become broader and more subjective but are not irrelevant. In fact, Kronman's definition of secular humanism rests on three assumptions: (1) There are elements of human nature that are common to all; (2) nevertheless, human nature is not fixed, but is open and agile, thereby elevating the individual and encouraging the formation of a life that is uniquely one's own; and (3) there is no need to endorse the idea that God is the starting point in higher education.

These assumptions serve as the ground rules for what he calls the "great conversation" in the liberal arts classroom, in which the great works of the past are discussed and debated. Students are to consider themselves respectful latecomers to this evolving conversation, but legitimate and full participants nonetheless. They are to derive meaning from participation in the great conversation. This is the sort of education Kronman advocates.

THE AGE OF NIHILISM

The third period Kronman delineates began in the late 1960s and extends to the present day. Kronman describes these years in higher education as a time when the basic assumptions of secular humanism have come under attack. There is hostility toward the great conversation, particularly since it is rooted in the intellectual and artistic achievements of the West. The great thinkers are no longer considered exceptional but just one group of voices among many other, equally valid voices. There is no longer any canon of great thinkers.

Kronman devotes entire chapters to the research ideal and to political correctness, two central culprits in what he considers the self-destruction of colleges and universities and the “crisis of authority” in the humanities. He believes that few faculty members in the secular academy today see themselves as having either the competence or the duty to guide students in discovering the meaning of life. I have little reason to doubt him.

Though Kronman does not give this period a name, I would suggest the “age of nihilism.” *The American Heritage Dictionary*, fourth ed., defines nihilism as the “rejection of all distinctions in moral or religious value and a willingness to repudiate all previous theories of morality or religious belief,” and this is exactly how Kronman describes today’s academy.

He believes that while parents still send their children to college with the expectation that they will receive (among other things) guidance on the meaning of life, the secular academy has, in fact, lost all ability to deliver on this central part of its mission.

A COMPELLING VALUE PROPOSITION

Kronman believes this mission can be recovered but only through the revival of secular humanism; he does not favor a return to anything like the age of piety, for, at best, he sees no role for religious faith in the great conversation, and, at worst, he sees faith as an impediment. As a consequence, his analysis, though thoughtful and prescient in many respects, completely disregards the more than one hundred

Christ-centered colleges and universities in the United States that do hold the question of life’s larger meaning as central to their mission.

In the wake of Kronman’s powerful critique, other members of the secular academy have questioned the Ivy League’s contemporary educational approach, and some have even been willing to acknowledge the attractiveness of the Christian liberal

arts. For instance, in an article titled “Don’t Send Your Kid to the Ivy League,” Kronman’s former colleague William Deresiewicz, who taught English at Yale from 1998 to 2008, criticizes the way that elite schools are robbing students of what he considers to be the most important component of college: learning how to think. According to Deresiewicz, “Our system of elite education manufactures young people who are smart and talented and driven, yes, but also anxious, timid, and lost, with little intellectual curiosity and a stunted sense of purpose: trapped in a bubble of privilege, heading meekly in the same direction, great at what they’re doing but with no idea why they are doing it.”¹

And with what would be perceived as a disloyal break from the academy, Deresiewicz argues that a compelling alternative to secular higher education can be found within the Christian liberal arts. “Religious colleges—even obscure, regional schools that no one has ever heard of on the coasts—often do a much better job,” he writes. “What an indictment of the Ivy League and its peers: that colleges four levels down on the academic totem pole deliver a better education, in the highest sense of the word.”²

These Christ-centered schools (as distinct from the many formally church-related schools that have drifted from their orthodox roots) believe that education is more than the transmission of knowledge and professional training. While they take academic rigor seriously and graduate highly employable students, they also, as a faithful remnant of the age of piety, set out to shape the souls of their students. At such colleges, the educators seek to develop a certain kind of person for church and society.

The Christian liberal arts education remains the best education available to humanity. We who deliver it offer a unique mixture of intellectual inquiry, spiritual formation, and a commitment to calling and career. In short, we foster the formation of the whole person. Our students grapple with the meaning of life in the context of a Christ-centered worldview; they are held to rigorous standards of study and learning; and they are equipped for a wide array of postgraduate callings and careers. And in an increasingly crowded and competitive higher education marketplace, the value of a Christian liberal arts education has never been greater.

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- 1 William Deresiewicz, "Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League: The Nation's Top Colleges Are Turning Our Kids into Zombies," *New Republic*, July 21, 2014, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118747/ivy-league-schools-are-overrated-send-your-kids-elsewhere>.
- 2 Ibid.