

APOLOGIA

... always be ready to give a defense [Greek, *apologia*]

to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you ... 1 PETER 3:15

THE MENTAL MELTDOWN OF THE CHURCH -- PAGE 2

things we longed for, and looked after was to advance *Learning* and perpetuate it to Posterity; dreading to have an illiterate Ministry to the Churches, when our present Ministers shall lie in the dust.²

If this was the attitude of our forefathers, whence came the anti-intellectualism which is so endemic in the evangelical churches of today? Richard Hofstadter, who gave us the most famous study on American anti-intellectualism, points up the contrast between the prevalent attitude in recent generations and the attitude of the Puritan founders of America:

It is doubtful that any community ever had more faith in the value of learning and intellect than Massachusetts Bay ... In its inception, New England was not an agricultural community, nor a manufacturing community, nor a trading community: it was a thinking community; an arena and mart for ideas; its characteristic organ being not the hand, nor the heart, nor the pocket, but the brain. ... Probably no other community of pioneers ever so honored study, so revered the symbols and instruments of learning.³

The Mental Meltdown of the Church

8 FACTORS IN THE INTELLECTUAL DECLINE OF EVANGELICALS

By DAVID ASPINALL

[General outline by Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*]

*"In America religion is the road to knowledge and the observance of divine laws leads man to civil freedom."*¹

SUCH was the observation of French historian Alexis de Tocqueville upon his visit to America in the 1830s. Whence came America's attitude toward education? Religious historian Sidney Ahlstrom points back to the Puritan pilgrims. He refers us to the Puritan explanation for the founding of Harvard, America's first university, in the book *New England's First Fruits* (1643) We have preserved the original's quaint spelling:

After God had carried us safe to New England, and wee had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, rear'd convenient places for God's worship, and settled the Civill Government; One of the next



ALEXIS de TOCQUEVILLE
(1805-1859)

The author of **DEMOCRACY
IN AMERICA**, perhaps the
most famous work written
about America by an
outsider

I POLARIZATION:

The first factor to which Os Guinness points as decisive in the shift from that Puritan ideal is **polarization** -- "*a false antagonism between heart and mind*". Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper exemplifies the traditional Calvinist position on the Lordship of Christ over ALL creation:

There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, "This is mine! This belongs to me!"⁴

Kuyper practised this principle by becoming Prime Minister of Holland. He took seriously the admonition to *love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind* -- Matt. 22:37 (NAS). John Wesley, founder of that branch of the church which sometimes gets blamed for the anti-intellectualism of North American Christians, was as outspoken as any Calvinist regarding the place of the mind:

It is a fundamental principle with us that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, that all irrational religion is false religion.⁵

2 PIETISM:

Pietism, as defined by Guinness, is “**heart religion** ... that places piety, or total life devotion at the center of the Christian faith” (emphasis ours). At its best, pietism produces better Christians. At its worst, it can lead to the invisible church of the Nazi era. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the confessing church opposed this brand of ‘personal religion’, seeing that it led to Hitler’s virtual free hand in the 1930s. Bonhoeffer saw that the majority of pietist Christians in Germany had become escapist, “salvation-egotists”. North American Christians too risk the accusation of social irrelevance. How did this “salvation-egotism” take over North America? By the end of the 19th century, as mass evangelism become more central to the church’s vision, we have preachers such as Billy Sunday bragging that he didn’t “know any more about theology than a jack-rabbit knew about ping pong.”

3 PRIMITIVISM (and its unintentional offspring, PROGRESSIVISM):

Guinness defines primitivism as “the impulse to restore the primitive or original order of life as revealed in the Scriptures”. It can also be called **restorationism**. America in particular has given in to this tendency, for good and bad, due to its championing the pioneer spirit. The *New World* mentality has often encouraged the throwing off of all that is associated with the *Old World* -- unfortunately including the vigorous mental life of Europe. Americans too have tended to associate the **pure** with the **simple**. This leads to a suspicion of and impatience towards anything that is complex, that requires time and discipline. The results for higher education have been catastrophic. Once the myth of the pure original church is accepted, all changes effected since are seen as evidence of decline. A discerning visitor from the Old World could quickly pick up the tendency in American attitudes as early as the 1830s:

Those who went before are soon forgotten ... Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors ... it throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.⁶

4 POPULISM:

Says Guinness, “Understood as a movement committed to the rights, wisdom, and virtues of common people, populism is one of the greatest strengths and weaknesses of both evangelicalism and America as a whole”. This trust of the

common people, inevitably, has the negative side of distrust of the educated -- even of the clergy. As Guinness sees it, this right of personal judgment became the “Magna Carta of the Common Man”. And “No creed but the Bible” simply translates as “I’ll make my own creed, thank you”. Even such respected leaders as Alexander Campbell, founder of the Churches of Christ, and Lewis Sperry Chafer, first president of Dallas Seminary, succumbed to this conceit.⁷ Timothy Dwight, grandson of Jonathan Edwards and President of Yale, had no patience with those who held the attitude that the deeper things of God require no special training. Of such he said:

While they demand a 7-year apprenticeship, for the purpose of learning to make a shoe, or an axe, they suppose the system of Providence, together with the numerous, and frequently abstruse, doctrines and precepts, contained in the Scriptures, may all be comprehended without learning, labor, or time.⁸

5 PLURALISM:

Philosopher Bertrand Russell defined himself as a pluralist, believing in the relativity of all truth, and consequently calling himself a “logical atomist”. But modern pluralism is better understood as a social condition, not a philosophical doctrine. It is simply the reality of religious, ethnic and cultural groups living intermixed in society. In effect religions that define themselves by absolutes are compelled, often by law, to live as if they do not. On that virtue which seems to be the only absolute of such a society, tolerance, G.K. Chesterton commented, “Tolerance is the virtue of those who don’t believe anything.” As commonly practised, pluralism often connotes **not** respect of neighbour, but rather indifference to truth.

6 PRAGMATISM:

William James, father of Pragmatism, held that truth proved itself in human behaviour, not in philosophical abstraction. While this version of ‘know them by their fruits’ has something in common with Christianity, in social practice it has led to the relativism that says “that may be true *for you*, but ...”. Related to this view is the common sense view that it matters less whether something is **true** than whether it **works**. This view has been termed **utilitarianism**. Under the influence of this emphasis, which values usefulness more than truth, and positive thinking more than right thinking, the church today has become

more conscious of **method** and much less patient with the abstract. *Is Christianity true?* is no longer the question, but *Will it work?*

7 PHILISTINISM:

Of the 'isms' that have brought about the evangelical church's anti-intellectualism, philistinism may be the hardest to root out. That is because it finds its origin in the American character's distrust of the 'edumacated', and -- even more crucially -- in the laziness of fallen human nature. This plays out in a desire to 'get things quick', and in religion as the equation of simplicity, even naivete, with spirituality -- Christ's 'childlike' Christianity. Philistinism therefore decries anything which is not directly linked to this supposed 'simple eye' Christianity. Philistinism has no time, and sees no value, in anything not directly tied to spiritual goals. Literature, art, music not overtly 'Christian' and everything else in culture as well, are 'worldly' by definition. Charles Finney represents this view well when he says, "I cannot that a person who has ever known the love of God can relish a secular novel."⁹ This view tends to find value only in things pertaining to the *new creation*, and sees that which pertains merely to the *natural* creation as being at best a relative waste of time.

8 PREMILLENNIALISM:

Like pietism, premillennialism is not *in itself* a problem. However, as Guinness sees it, in its most popular North American form (dispensationalism), the premillennial emphasis upon the last days, the *future* not the present, causes many Christians to parallel the unhealthy mindset of the racetrack gambler, who cannot function in the real world because of the addictive fascination of his habit. In this worldview, 'soul-saving' is the only truly worthwhile human activity. Guinness sees the internal logic of dispensationalism: "When the house is on fire, life is worth more than books and precious objects".⁸ Why worry about "life" when LIFE is at risk?

REFERENCES:

1. *Democracy in America* (Vintage, 1945), Vol. 1, p. 43
2. Quoted in Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (Image, 1975), Vol. 1, p. 198
3. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (Vintage, 1962), p. 59
4. Quoted in Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency* (IVP, 1992), p. 145
5. Quoted in Hofstadter, p. 96
6. *Democracy in America* (Doubleday, 1969), p. 508

7. Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds* (Baker, 1994), pp. 46-47

8. Quoted in Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the American Mind* (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 1289.

9. Hofstadter, p. 94