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Closing of the American Mind (Book Review)

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The Closing of the American Mind. Allan Bloom. New York: Simm and Schuster, 1987, 392 pp. Reviewed by the Reverend Stacey Hebden Taylor, Rector of St. Albans Anglican Church, Tacoma, Washington. (Former Associate Professor of Sociology at Dordt College.)

Allan Bloom, who teaches at the University of Chicago, has dropped a literary bombshell in the portals of American academe. His book is a powerful indictment of the epistemological and moral relativism which prevails in American universities. The "liberals" and the atheists will be howling their protests for years to come.

For the Christian reviewer the reaction is bound to be somewhat different. Bloom finds the cure for America's relativism in a return to the study of philosophy beginning with Socrates as portrayed by Plato in the *Republic* and in the *Symposium*. To the crisis faced by American higher education, the Christian by contrast, finds the only possible answer in Jesus Christ. Christ is the Logos, the Meaning, the Purpose of the whole creation in whom God has summed up all things in heaven and earth and in whom alone all things rightfully cohere (Colossians 1:16-20).

Bloom begins his critical essay with a discussion of what is meant today by "openness." He distinguishes between two conceptions of openness. One is a view with which American students from elementary school right up to the university have been brainwashed. Our students, he writes, "are unified only in their relativism and in their allegiance to equality.... The relativity of truth is...the condition of a free society, or so they see it" (25). He claims that relativism is necessary for the first view of openness: "this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating.... Openness...is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger.... The point is not to correct the mistakes of others and really be right; it is *not* to think you are right at all" (26). This explains the intolerance of those secular humanists in our public schools and universities who claim to be so tolerant, an intolerance towards the teaching of the Bible as the absolutely true Word of God.

The second view of openness by contrast "invites us to the quest for knowledge and certitude, for which history and the various cultures provide a brilliant array of examples for examination" (41).

In Part One titled "Students" Bloom provides fascinating discussions on books, music, and human relationships. Bloom claims that students now arrive at our universities with their minds (1) ignorant and cynical about our political heritage, and (2) without any belief in Biblical religion (56).

This loss of any connection with their heritage is most apparent, says Bloom, in the number of freshmen now going to university who have not read one famous book. In his chapter "Books" Bloom tells us that he asked his younger students which books really count for them. Most students remained silent, puzzled by the question. Bloom writes that students "for the most part turn to the movies or TV video cassettes for their spare time activities."

According to Bloom the latest enemy of the vitality of

classic texts is feminism. In this feminist view, says Bloom: "All literature up to today is sexist"...and must be abolished or rewritten to satisfy the feminists, whose activism has been directed against the content of books. This even includes the Holy Bible! The latest translation of the Bible "suppresses gender references to God so that future generations will not have to grapple with the fact that God was once a sexist" (65, 66).

One thing that appeals greatly to our youth is rock music. The spiritual void left by the waning of family and faith has been filled with rock music. Rock, however, Bloom says, "ruins the imagination of young people and makes it very difficult for them to have a passionate relationship to the art and thought that are the substance of liberal education" (79).

Rock has only "a barbaric appeal," with its great lyrical themes of "sex, hate, and a smarmy, hypocritical version of brotherly love." Rock has become big business, bigger than the movies, bigger than professional sports, bigger than television. Leisure has now become entertainment. People now work so they can be amused. "The music business is peculiar only in that it caters...to children, treating [them]...as though they were ready to enjoy adult sexual fulfillment." Bloom notes, "The emptiness of *values* results in the acceptance of the natural *facts* as ends" (77).

In his chapter devoted to "Relationships" Bloom writes pungently of self-centeredness, equality, race, sex, divorce, love, and eros. He does not place all the blame for our ills upon the university. He sees evidence that "country, religion, family, ideas of civilization, all the sentimental and historical forces that stood between cosmic infinity and the individual, providing some notion of a place within the whole, have been rationalized and have lost their compelling force" (85).

Bloom has found that his students are terrified of making any commitment to each other. The sexual liberation movement, Bloom argues, dismantled the structure of involvement and attachment, "reducing sex to thing-in-itself." This collided with the feminists' contention that biology should not be destiny, an idea that eliminated the social differentiation between men and women.

This tension has produced young people who do not know what to feel for each other. Relations have become routine, with no illusions of eternity nor of commitment. Sex is prevalent and sadly businesslike. Couples, Bloom writes, "are roommates, which is what they usually call themselves, with sex and utilities included in the rent."

Perhaps the most interesting part of this section of Bloom's book is his discussion of the importance of modesty. Modesty in the old dispensation was *the* female virtue, because it governed the powerful desire that related men to women, providing a gratification in harmony with the procreation and rearing of children, the risk and responsibility

of which fell naturally—that is biologically—on women. Now such modesty is to be suppressed in the interests of women's liberation. "Central to the feminist project is the suppression of modesty.... The sexual revolution, however, wanted men and women to get together bodily, while feminism wanted them to be able easily to get along separately" (101). The suppression of modesty has not only made the attainment of male desire easier but it also has dismantled the structure of involvement and attachment, reducing sex to a purely biological act like defecating. Modern women, says Bloom, hate modesty because it reminds them of their mothers' subservience to their fathers. "Modesty is a constant reminder of the peculiar relatedness of the sexes to each other...which impedes the female self's own free creation of herself." The picture of modern women which emerges from Bloom's analysis will anger them.

The most important part of *The Closing of the American Mind* is Part Two: Nihilism, American Style. This section deals with The German Connection, Two Revolutions and Two States of Nature, The Self, Creativity, Culture, Values, The Nietzscheanization of the Left or Vice Versa, and Our Ignorance. Few writers have written so powerfully of the malaise which afflicts our beloved country, "a sickness unto death." Bloom views America's fundamental problem as basically philosophical in the sense of the decay of any belief in objective truth, goodness, and beauty. He shows how, as a result of a corrupted version of Nietzsche's nihilistic philosophy, the United States has become "spiritually detumescent" as "the self became the modern substitute for the soul."

According to Bloom, America's prevailing irrationalism is the outcome of Rousseau's critique of 18th Century Enlightenment liberalism and rationalism, beginning a long process of the separation of humanity from nature. He exploded the "simplistic harmoniousness between nature and society" which had been the basis of the American political order founded in 1776. Says Bloom, "Rousseau...founded the modern psychology of the self in its fullness, with its unending search for what is really underneath the surface of rationality and civility,...its unending task of constituting some kind of healthy harmony between above and below" (177). Whereas formerly people had been God-directed, now they have become inner-directed: "The psychology of the self has succeeded so well that it is now the instinct of most of us to turn for a cure for our ills back within ourselves rather than to the nature of things" (179).

However, it was Nietzsche's influence which proved decisive in undermining Americans' faith in their political system and in their view of the world and of themselves. Further, he destroyed Americans' belief in the objectivity of their values and of natural science itself. Nietzsche killed the scientific spirit at the heart of Western democracy. His view of cultural relativism proclaimed that since "God is dead," right and wrong no longer exist as objective realities. Man is now "Beyond Good and Evil." Values are not rational and they are not grounded in the natures of those subject to them. No value is rationally or objectively

preferable to any other. Therefore values must be imposed by those with the will to power.

Those with the strength of will to impose their values—and not those who base their values upon reason—now take over the leadership of civilization. Thus Moses, it is claimed by Nietzsche, founded the religion of the Jews and Zarathustra the religion of Zoroastrianism. "Culture" and "creativity," which are man-made, have become today's new "buzzwords" reflecting the modern irrational belief in man's own autonomy.

Sigmund Freud added to this irrationalism by enabling "Americans to think the satisfaction of their sexual desires was the most important element of happiness. He provided rationalization for instinct...." (233). While Freud himself was much more pessimistic about man's future, Americans dispensed with the pessimism. The sexual revolution was, to paraphrase Bloom, nihilism with a happy ending.

Even if values are determined irrationally and illiberally, they are nevertheless powerful forces. Martin Heidegger, taking up where Nietzsche left off, believed that the life of the mind should be "committed" to "an emerging revelation of being, incarnated in a mass movement" (311). "That he did so," writes Bloom, "was not a result of his political innocence but a corollary of his critique of rationalism." The movement referred to by Heidegger was Hitler's National Socialism. Such was the inevitable outcome of Nietzsche's proclamation that God is dead. If God was dead, Nazism showed that man was also dead. Everything is now permissible. There are not objective standards by which to condemn evil because man is now living "beyond good and evil."

This phenomenon of mass movement re-emerged in America during the 1960s on the Left, under the guise of greater openness, less rigidity, and freedom from authority. In fact its leaders called it "The Movement." Bloom gives us his own first hand experiences of what happened during the Student Revolt. In a chapter on "The Sixties" Bloom writes, "The American university in the sixties was experiencing the same dismantling of the structure of rational inquiry as had the German university in the thirties. No longer believing in their higher vocation, both gave way to a highly ideologized student populace. And the content of the ideology was the same—value commitment. The university had abandoned all claim to study or inform about value—undermining the sense of the value of what it taught, while turning over the *decision* about values to the folk, the *Zeitgeist*, the relevant. Whether it be Nuremberg or Woodstock, the principle is the same.... Enlightenment in America came close to breathing its last during the sixties" (313-314).

The same professors who had condemned the German professors for not resisting Hitler in Germany during the 1930's now remained silent while Black militants and White radicals took over their campuses sometimes at the point of a gun. The faculties of our major universities now consist of cowards who cave in to the demands of Black or Feminist Power. Bloom describes his own terrible experiences at Cornell University in the late 1960s, when students seized buildings and held professors at gun point. The vaunted

moral concerns of the students, Bloom says, were nothing more than "evanescent mist." What really distinguished the 1960s, he claims, was that for the first time, "high intellectual life became inextricably linked with American barbarism." Bloom claims the sacrifices made by the students to their morality will suffice to show its character:

They were able to live as they pleased in the university, as *in loco parentis* responsibilities were abandoned; drugs became a regular part of life, with almost no interference from university authorities, while the civil authority was kept at bay by the university's alleged right to police its own precincts; all sexual restrictions imposed by rule or disapproval were overturned; academic requirements were relaxed in every imaginable way, and grade inflation made it difficult to flunk; avoidance of military service was a way of life and a principle. All of these privileges were disguised with edifying labels such as individual responsibility, experience, growth, development, self-expression, liberation, concern. Never in history had there been such a marvelous correspondence between the good and the pleasant (328-329).

In his final chapter on "The Student and the University" Bloom considers "The Decomposition of the University" and "The Disciplines" and makes a concluding statement.

Bloom bemoans the lack of a philosophical integration of the curriculum. He also discusses various proposals for reform, such as making students take courses in each of the general divisions of the university or to take composite courses, e.g., "Man in Nature," "War and Responsibility." He writes that "the crisis of liberal education is a reflection of a crisis at the peaks of learning, an incoherence and incompatibility among the first principles with which we interpret the world, an intellectual crisis of the greatest magnitude.... Liberal education flourished when it prepared the way for the discussion of a unified view of nature and man's place in it.... It decayed when what lay beyond it were only specialties, the premises of which do not lead to any such vision" (346-347). This criticism is similar to one made by Sir Walter Moberley in *The Crisis in the University* published in 1948.

Bloom explains that the decomposition of the university means the surrender of the professors in the humanities and social science divisions to the blackmail threats of the Black and feminist students. They demanded that the professors

within these division re-write their courses so as to exclude any racism or sexism and they demanded and obtained grade inflation for their poor academic showing. As a result "the humanities and social sciences were debauched and grade inflation took off, while the natural sciences remain largely the preserve of white males" (351).

Bloom has written a book which every Christian pastor, teacher, and parent should read. However, Christians do not believe that the answer to the crisis in our colleges, schools, and universities is to be found in a return to rationalist philosophy or learning. The root of the crisis, in my view, lies in the attempt to keep the God of the Bible out of the curriculum. American and German university professors have taken the doctrine of academic value neutrality to absurd extremes declaring that science as such is incompetent to determine or influence events. The result of this moral vacuum in American and German science has been to encourage the rise of Nazism in Germany and irrationalist movements in America, e.g. New Age Cults.

In revolting against the liberal university, American students have perhaps unwittingly been protesting against the lack of commitment to any moral values not based upon objective and absolute standards. The claim of autonomy and neutrality which has lain at the basis of the liberal university in our century is specious. Every scientist in the world, whether admitting to the fact or not, is responsible to God the Creator and to Christ the Wisdom of God (Proverbs) for the use to which he or she puts his or her talents. Scientists can not evade the dreadful responsibilities of their "office," as the invention and later use of the atomic bomb made clear.

The reason that there can be no neutrality in science is because of the great "antithesis" which exists between those who love God and those who hate or ignore Him. This is the root of the crisis in American education today, namely, that it has tried to become independent of God and to be neutral. Such a claim to autonomy which even Bloom boasts is as old as Adam always leads to death. It is this fact which explains the "mindlessness" which Charles Silberman so deplored in *The Crisis of the Classroom*.

Either the university and the school return to a biblical revelational basis for their theorizing or they will collapse into nihilism where the very existence of an objective Truth and Science "out there" is denied. Thus has the living God of the Bible turned the tables upon those arrogant rationalists and liberal professors who imagined they could think truly without the "ordering" principle of God's Word revealed in the Bible.