

# An Honest Look at Education

By T.E. Wilder

*The Closing of the American Heart: What's Really Wrong With America's Schools*, by Ronald H. Nash (N.p.: Probe Books, 1990) 235 pages, index, reading list.

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Nash begins on the right note. “We should feel grief and despair at the millions of young lives that have been deprived of a proper education and at what those individuals, their families, and our nation will lose as a result. But we should also feel real anger and resentment at those people and institutions that readily took billions of dollars in public and private money, profited personally from the system, and have through their incompetence, ignorance, greed, and assorted other intellectual and moral vices created the intellectual and moral crisis that now afflicts every level of American education.” (p. 13) What a relief not to be told once again that the problems of American education are due to the failure of well-intentioned people to adopt just the right reform scheme or educational methodology! He goes on to note that “when you're involved in a war—in this case, a war for the hearts, minds, and souls of our children—you can hardly help your cause by mistaking the enemy for a friend.”

Ronald Nash, for over twenty-five years on the philosophy faculty of Western Kentucky University, is best known as the editor of many topical collections of essays often used as college textbooks, for volumes on philosophical movements in the Reformed camp, and for his efforts against intellectual fashions such as liberation theology and process theology. He has now assembled a handbook that analyzes systematically the condition of American education. This book is notable for its depth and completeness.

Yet throughout the book there is a strange double-mindedness. Nash seeks to sustain the insistence characteristic of Reformed thinkers that all men and all of life are religious, and that education necessarily incorporates a religious aim. Thus, the heart commitment of the educators determines the type of education they will bring forth. There are, therefore, no neutral methods or subjects. Yet he calls Roman Catholics and “conservative Jews” “important allies” of the “evangelical Christian” and urges them to “grasp the *substance* of my claims and apply them to their own context.” (pp. 14,15) Furthermore, he wants to reform the state schools, not abolish them.

The greatest fault of the book is its lack of a covenantal vision of man in society that can

be applied to education. Nash probably brings in as much Reformed theology as this publisher will let him get away with, but either from a desire to appeal to a broad evangelical (i.e. theologically mushy) readership, or because he doesn't embrace it himself, his analysis of education is not cast in terms of God's covenantal rule of blessings and judgments in his Kingdom, a rule that defines the roles and responsibilities of his servants. Thus the program of the book is defined by the problems he takes up seriatim after the introductory chapters—despite his quoting Francis Schaeffer's observation that the American evangelical sees things in bits and pieces, a problem here and a problem there, instead of in wholes, thereby failing to understand his situation.

Nash does an excellent job of cataloging the failures and abuses in American education. More than that, he effectively and vividly conveys to the reader the scope and significance of the failures. Nash always has an apt quote or illustration to drive his point home. In short, the book is thoroughly researched and prepared. In our own circles, state education has become such a byword and a hissing that we forget that the great majority of evangelicals fails to realize the full extent of its decadence and needs the message of this book.

An example of this failure is a letter that appeared in *World* some time ago. Written by an official in the Grand Rapids headquarters of the Christian school organization associated with the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), it berated Christians for not supporting state education. It was because Christians did not back such excellent programs as values clarification that state school education had reached its present moral decline. This letter, which should have provoked an outcry from parents and a thorough inquisition of the CRC education system, excited no comment at all. Nash, in his section on “moral illiteracy” gives three pages to an analysis of “The Values-Clarification Boondoggle” calling it “one of the more disturbing signs of the moral vacuum in America's educational system”. (p. 54)

Nash also seeks to identify the changing cultural values that underlie the decline in education. He finds three intellectual enemies of “The Permanent Things”: Relativism, Positivism, and Secularism-Naturalism-Humanism. Nash quotes Will Herberg's definition of relativism as “the *creeping conviction* that there is no such thing as truth or right, but only the varying beliefs of varying cultures, each apparently justified in its own terms;...” (p. 62) It is here that Nash commits an unfortunate lapse of scholarship, especially considering that he is a professional philosopher. He undertakes to characterize and refute a form of relativism that is now eclipsed by much more sophisticated versions. While it is true enough that state school teachers and professors of education theory—fools that they are—do resort to crude relativism, Nash seems to think that that is all the relativism there is. (For an introduction to contemporary formulations of relativism see Michael Krausz, ed., *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989.) The reader who tries Nash's refutation of relativism on someone knowledgeable in the area will receive an unpleasant surprise.

Positivism, again in Herberg's definition, holds that “the only kind of reality and truth is

the kind [allegedly] revealed by and verifiable in terms of, positive science.” (p. 65) Hard core positivism, as Nash rightly points out, has lost its intellectual defenders but has worked its way deeply into the culture and has a legion of unintellectual champions. Its intellectual decline, I venture to guess, will soon be partially reversed as the current feminist/fascist/deconstructionist lunacy in the universities provokes a neo-positivist reaction. Like relativism, positivism is capable of more subtle and sophisticated expressions that resist easy refutation. Nash is to be commended, however, for leading his readers into a reflection on these questions. Finally, “Secularism-Naturalism-Humanism” are defined respectively as “rejection of the Sacred”, the “basic claim that *nothing exists outside the material, mechanical, rational order*”, and making the goal of life self-realization and fulfillment as defined by man without regard to God's revelation. (pp. 62-69)

There follows a detailed description of the moral and intellectual shanty town that is the educational system, a description distilled from several exposés that have been widely publicized, are easily available, and one or another of which are familiar to most of the readers of *Contra Mundum*. Thus, for the person who is well read on these issues there may be nothing new in Nash's entire book. Its value is the collection into one source and effective presentation of this material, especially for the reader without the time or inclination to read a stack of books, or who needs a succinct reference or reminder. Nash owes an immense debt to those previous researchers who have labored for years to awaken the Christian public to the educational catastrophe.

His prescription for educational reform is a disappointment. He lists “Four Essential Steps” in a chapter by that name, with the sections being “The Educational Role of the Family”, “Student Motivation and Preparation”, “Increasing Local Control of Schools”, and “Increasing Parental Choice” (in the fashion of the current legislative proposals). In the next chapter Nash sings the praises of pluralism. Emphasizing that the state schools are not religiously neutral, he calls for state support of all schools. His discussion draws heavily from *Society, State and Schools* by the pluralist theorist Rockne McCarthy. Nash is, at least, aware of the dangers of the state control that accompanies state funding and suggests legislative language in any tuition voucher law to ban state intrusion.

Throughout the book Nash relies on the distillations of his wide reading in education. In the chapter on “The Christian School Movement” this approach lets him down. Here he mainly has studies by anti-Christian critics to draw from so he must largely confine himself to counter-attacking their neo-Marxist critiques. In part this serves a purpose of Nash's own, namely to excoriate those aspects of Christian education that he deplors. Nash would like to see much more liberal arts education and less indoctrination. He is concerned that most Christians do not have a good vision of education when they set up their schools, and are merely fleeing the evils found in state education. He concedes the schools' value, however.

Ironically, many Christian schools are still providing an education superior to what's available in regional public schools, without fully understanding what's

going on. They are doing this with much less money and often with teachers whose credentials are scorned by the very educational bureaucrats who control teacher certification and who have helped create the disaster we call public education. (p. 137)

In an appendix Nash does provide a curriculum proposal (used in Trinity Christian Academy of Addison, Texas) and also a reading list.

Arriving at Nash's own area of professional endeavor, higher education, his book undergoes a marked improvement. He takes a long look at higher education and the adversary culture. "According to reliable sources, some ten thousand American college and university professors freely identify themselves as Marxists. To this number can be added thousands of others who strongly sympathize with left-wing political and social values." (p. 142) "The adversary culture is bent on obliterating the past from our memory, bent on destroying the past, bent on rewriting history." The "radical Left sees the function of education to be the nihilistic rejection of truth." (p. 146)

While describing the attitudes and methods of the secular academic left Nash frequently points to the parallel world of the Evangelical academic left.

But many Christians have yet to grasp the growing Marxist influence within pockets of American Christendom that have been theologically conservative. I am referring to those American Protestants known as evangelicals. It is difficult to think of one Marxist idea mentioned earlier in this chapter that has not been propagated in radical left-wing but self-styled evangelical journals like *Sojourners* and *The Other Side*....

Varieties of Marxist thought have become deeply entrenched on several major evangelical campuses. Some evangelical sociologists criticize their society from a Marxist perspective, while some evangelical economics departments present socialism as the only option for "thinking Christians". This pro-Marxist bias is also evident in other departments in these colleges and seminaries. (pp. 148, 149)

Nash warns that many Christians "refuse to believe that leftist views of the kind described in this chapter are really being propagated on evangelical college campuses." He might have gone on to explain a major cause of this disconnection from reality—the meretricious nature of the denominational presses. Christian college Marxists thrive because Christian magazines, especially denominational organs, refuse to expose their activities and because of the complicity of the administrators who hire and shelter these reds, but put out the bureaucratic party line about what fine Christian colleges they are running.

Nash quotes Bill Anderson saying that "the monopoly of the left at the secular colleges

and universities...presents Christian institutions with an unparalleled opportunity to offer an education that promotes objective analysis and tolerates contrary points of view.... A curriculum that encourages students to conduct research and examine the world through absolute standards will help educate the mind in ways that the murky, relativistic Stanford model cannot. At the present time, however, it looks as though many Christian colleges are either preparing to or are already following the path set by Stanford and the counterculture left.” (p. 152)

Since Nash claims to know what is happening on many Christian college campuses it is too bad that he has not told us. The one specific source he does cite here is Edward Ericson's 1985 article in the *Reformed Journal* which exposes far-left radicalism at Calvin College. (In a later chapter Nash identifies Houghton College as another contaminated site.) Of course, one expects these things at Calvin, which is notorious as the center of opposition to the Reformed world-and-life view. We really need a book on this one topic of corrupt campuses. It is when we notice these gaps in our knowledge that the near-absence of Christian news journalism today becomes apparent as well. Who, though, would pay these journalists? The go-along-to-get-along evangelical establishment has all the money! Here would be a good project for North's ICE: have a team of journalists research and write a school by school exposé of socialism in the top 20 evangelical schools, college by college, naming names. That ought to sell, especially to parents who at present can't get honest information about their denomination's college.

Nash berates certain unnamed evangelical colleges that “are long on spirituality but short on academics.... Some of these colleges have dragged their feet in upgrading their faculty. There are thousands of unemployed Ph.D.'s representing many academic fields; some of them evangelicals. And yet, some evangelical colleges still have many faculty members without earned doctorates. That situation is impossible to justify.” (p. 162) This seems a very dubious criticism to me. There are, of course, Christians with Ph.D.s whose theological commitments (e.g. to a serious application of Reformed Christianity to all fields, or simply non-subscription to pre-millennialism) keeps them out of wishy-washy or dispensationalist schools. But in general a college does well to keep a sound and able teacher without a Ph.D. rather than looking for a credentialed but probably compromised replacement.

Many schools are themselves compromised. Nash tells us that “some evangelical schools evidence a noticeable wobbling on important theological matters. Some schools that are evangelical by reputation do not take their doctrinal statements seriously any more. Some of these schools still want the public to think they're theologically sound, when, in fact, they are rapidly moving away from the evangelical camp.” (p. 163) Nash recounts a fascinating exchange between George Marsden and himself at a 1989 conference in which he pointed out that the evangelical schools created to replace the colleges that had turned liberal are now taking the same path. Marsden acknowledged that this is happening, but dismissed it as an inevitable historical cycle. This attitude disturbs Nash, but the element that both these men are missing is the role of the church. Most evangelical colleges receive church contributions, and it is the failure of church

government that is behind the college failures. The church “statesmen” who are elevated to leadership in denominations and church associations tend to be timeservers or superannuated burn-outs who cannot or will not stand up against ecclesiastical or academic rot. For the college problem to be solved, the church problem must be solved. As it is, the academic decay accelerates the same process in the church by producing class after class of theologically softened graduates to replace older generations of faithful church members. And people continue to give their money because the whole establishment, both ecclesiastical and scholastic, lies to them about what is going on!

It is possible to clean up a college, as the case of Trinity College in Deerfield, Illinois shows. Once plagued by a faculty including behaviorists and Marxists and a student body of licentious undergraduates (given a choice by their pietistic parents to attend the denominational school or pay for their own education), the college came under new administration and, I have been told, has been reformed. I was a security guard there in the bad old days, (i.e., one of the people charged with enforcing the rules), and there was only one thing that the then president Harry Evans (“Fat Harry” to us) insisted upon above all else—that the campus look impressive to potential donors coming to visit. To this end the rule with the highest enforcement priority was the ban on cars parking on sidewalks, because they left oil stains. Students sleeping in each other's arms in the student lounge, “panty raids” etc., hardly merited attention. In such a situation, reform must begin with the wholesale eradication of the administration.

Nash's suggestion is merely a new watchdog agency, independent of both the Christian College Coalition and the Christian College Consortium, as these two agencies “often seem more interested in promoting a far-left political agenda than dealing with any theological wobbling in member schools.” (p. 166) But if “anyone thought it was difficult to get television evangelists to submit to an examination of their financial accountability, wait until some effort is made to get evangelicals colleges to submit to a test of their educational and theological accountability.” (*Ibidem*)

One curious omission from Nash's litany of complaints about modern educational lunacies is feminism with its tremendous hold on higher education, both humanist and evangelical, and with its agenda to propagandize children from the nursery up. Instead, Nash panders to feminists with a politically correct substitution of “she” for “he” at many points in his text. This sort of fem-fascist talk is becoming all too common in the evangelical press, and it is sad to see it in what purports to be a bold exposé of the radical fanaticism permeating education. Whether this is the fault of Nash or of the publishers is not revealed.

Forewords by R.C. Sproul have been attached to several recent books. The one in this book made me fear I had thrown away my money until I reached Nash's material. Amid other nonsense, we are told that when “Socrates drank the hemlock rather than submit to the dominant educational philosophy of his day, he did so with the full conviction that in this battle nothing less than Western civilization was at stake.” (p. 10) Someone should confiscate that man's typewriter!

Despite its many and serious weaknesses *The Closing of the American Heart* is a valuable weapon in the present culture war. This is not a book to pass by. The flood of books, even of exposés, on education overwhelms even the specialist. This one should be read by everyone with a serious interest in education. Provided it is supplemented by a good Reformed book on the theory of education, for many readers it can substitute for reading the shelves of books on education from which Nash drew to write it. Not everyone can undertake an intensive study of this topic. I know people who are waiting for a paperback edition so that they can buy quantities to distribute. I hope Probe soon makes available a cheap mass market edition.