



LOOKING BACK AND GOD AND THE PROFESSORS

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LOOKING BACK (1992)

Professor Sidney Hook, shortly before he died, published an autobiographical book entitled *Out of Step*. In it there is a chapter entitled "God and the Professors," which was the title of my address at the First Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion, held in New York in September of 1940.

Professor Hook devotes a good part of his chapter to an attack on my address at that conference, as well as to invidious comments on my stance as a philosopher—my so-called Thomism, my addiction to Aristotle, and so on—none of which he accurately delineates.

In this same chapter, he also treats the dispute that raged in the thirties between John Dewey and Robert Hutchins with regard to basic schooling and the undergraduate college. This I would like to reserve for later considerations when I discuss my activities as an educational reformer, especially *The Paideia Proposal* that was dedicated to both Dewey and Hutchins as the seminal sources of its central thesis. Nor is this the place to try to correct the many caricatures of my philosophical views that fill the pages of Professor Hook's chapter. That, too, will be dealt with later.

I had been invited by Rabbi Finkelstein to become a member of the committee to plan the First Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion. After attending a number of the meetings of this committee, I told Rabbi Finkelstein that I was a minority of one about how the conference should be organized. He flew to Chicago to persuade me not to resign and he, together with my dear friend Jacques Maritain, also tried to persuade me to read a paper at the conference, which would present my minority view of how the conference should be conducted.

I was reluctant until the last moment because I could so easily predict how my remarks would be received and misinterpreted. The decade of my experiences at the University of Chicago had prepared me for that. Sidney Hook's chapter entitled "God and the Professors" confirms the correctness of my foresight.

Professor Hook was probably justified in his angry reaction to what he regarded as gall on my part to address the assembled professors in such a fashion. There were, however, some amusing incidents which occurred on the afternoon of the speech. But first let me report the events that led up to my writing and delivery of the speech.

The founding members included the most eminent names in American academic life, representing the entire range of disciplines relevant to the theme of the conference—"Science, Philosophy and Religion in Their Relation to the Democratic Way of Life." The much smaller steering committee, whose meetings I attended on several occasions, included Prof. William Albright of Johns Hopkins University, Prof. Lyman Bryson of Teachers College at Columbia, Prof. Harlow Shapley of Harvard University, Prof. I. I. Rabi of Columbia, and Prof. Harold Lasswell, who had been a colleague of mine at Chicago. My friend Jacques Maritain

was also a member of the steering committee, but other obligations prevented him from attending its meetings.

I went to these meetings with the hope that something might be done that would sharply distinguish this conference from the annual meetings of learned societies at which professors read papers at one another. No one feels compelled to listen, because the papers can be read in the published proceedings. I have always regarded such sessions as exercises in futility. What I hoped might be planned under Rabbi Finkelstein's auspices was a disciplined colloquy of scholars representing the three great areas of science, philosophy, and religion, in the course of which they might make a patient effort to understand one another's positions and gradually reach agreement on a small number of fundamental propositions about the relation of their disciplines; or, failing that, to acknowledge the roots of their disagreement. If that could be done, then this conference might make a genuine contribution to modern culture, in a manner comparable to the contribution made by the great disputations in mediaeval universities to the culture of their day.

My hope did not survive the month of May. What shattered my illusion was the reaction of my fellow members to my proposal for the conduct of the conference. No delivery of formal addresses; no polite discussions from the floor afterward; no publication of proceedings. Instead, I urged the steering committee to draw up an orderly list of questions about the relation of science to philosophy and about the relation of both to religion—questions of the sort that had been the focus of the disputes at Chicago—and to agree to try to answer them in the order in which they were placed. I proposed that we then carry on discussions aimed at formulating answers to which we could get substantial agreement from all parties to the conference. The least we should settle for was a frank acknowledgment of our inability to agree, and an appraisal of the causes and consequences of our disagreements—consequences not only for our universities but also for democracy.

Accustomed as I was to being rebuffed, the reaction to this proposal surprised and dismayed me. I was told that the very idea of laying down a set of questions to be answered by all conference participants in a certain order was fundamentally authoritarian and undemocratic. When I observed that all we had to agree upon initially was a set of questions and their orderly arrangement, and that I was neither dictating the questions nor the answers, I was told that that made no difference. Any attempt to prescribe the content

of the conference that went beyond the statement of a theme which the scholars should have in mind when they prepared their papers departed from the democratic ideal of freedom of thought and discussion...

When I realized that Rabbi Finkelstein's conference would be exactly like all other scholarly conventions, I decided to withdraw from the whole affair. At the end of May, I wrote Rabbi Finkelstein that though I was deeply devoted to the original project, I now thought that nothing of any distinctive value would or could come of it. "My reason," I wrote to him, is very simple: the professors you have gathered together for these discussions are not willing to make the effort to understand one another, and even less are they interested in trying to reach agreement about anything, or even to join issue clearly in agreement The best thing for me to do is to withdraw. I'm an impolite sort of fellow and I am likely to insult my colleagues if they talk the way they usually do. If no real good comes from the sessions, you would like them to be at least gentle and friendly, and I am likely to be a gadfly and a nuisance to you.

Many letters passed between Rabbi Finkelstein and me during the rest of June and July, in which he persisted in urging me not to withdraw. Finally, toward the end of July, I sent him a six-page memorandum in which I set forth my reasons for thinking that the conference could not achieve any objective that I thought worthwhile. I also sent my friend Jacques Maritain a copy and found that his attitude toward the conference resembled mine. Yet he, too, urged me not to withdraw.

When he received my letter, Rabbi Finkelstein suggested that I come to the conference and present a paper that incorporated the substance of my memorandum. I could not believe that he really meant me to deliver an address in which I expressed my dissatisfaction with the procedure of the conference and predicted that it would fail to accomplish any significant results. When he assured me that that was precisely what he wanted and that he was fully cognizant of both the content and the temper of my message, I yielded. That was a mistake on my part, as it was a mistake on his part not to accept my resignation.

The conference sessions took place in the inner courtyard of the Jewish Theological Seminary. I delivered my paper on a bright sunny afternoon in mid-September to an audience of about two

hundred academicians. They were protected from the sunshine by canvas awnings stretched across the courtyard. It had rained the night before, and little pools of water had gathered in the corners of the awnings.


"God and the Professors" was the title of my paper, as I had warned Rabbi Finkelstein it would be. It plainly signaled the tenor of my remarks. If my aim had been to make friends and influence people, or to persuade any part of my audience, I could not have been more misguided or inept in the rhetoric I employed. But persuasion was no part of my intention, because I had no hope of succeeding. My sole intention was to tell the professors exactly what I thought of them in relation to the theme of the conference. That purpose my rhetoric served effectively ...

One event occurred that afternoon which caused my audience, otherwise stonily grim, to smile or even laugh out loud. After presenting the propositions which I thought ought to be affirmed if the conference were to become a significant enterprise, I read the passage in my paper which said:

If a group of men do not come together because they have common problems, and ultimately seek to reach common problems, there is no more community among them than there is in a modern university, or in modern culture itself.

Then, in a tone of voice that I probably hoped would sound like an Old Testament prophet predicting impending doom, I declared:

"The tower of Babel we are building invites another flood." At that very moment, the seams of some of the awnings opened up and the rainwater that had gathered there fell on the professors below.

I believe the content of my address at the First Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion is so relevant to the main concerns of this chapter that I have put a large excerpt from the first half of it in the Note appended to this chapter. My reason for doing this is not that I endorse everything that I then wrote, word for word. I would now make many emendations and additions. But the main thrust of the argument helps to explain, more fully than I have done so far, my deep antipathy to the professorial mentality. 

From his book, A Second Look in the Rearview Mirror

GOD AND THE PROFESSORS

Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion

The founding members of this conference are, for the most part, professors in American colleges and universities. They are eminent representatives of the various academic disciplines, among which are the three mentioned as most relevant to this Conference—science, philosophy, and religion. The presence of historians and humanistic scholars is justified by the modern extension of science to include the so-called social sciences, with which all research about human affairs and culture can be affiliated. Most of these professors belong to one or more of the several learned societies which meet annually for the reading and discussion of papers that purport to make contributions to truth, or at least to what is academically recognized as learning.

Hence, the reason for this Conference, for this additional meeting at which more papers are being read and discussed, must be some need for the professors to get together in a different way and for a different purpose. If the public wonders why we are gathering here this September, we must justify this Conference as trying to do something which is not, and perhaps cannot be, accomplished in the ordinary processes of our academic life—in classrooms, faculty meetings, or the sessions of learned societies.

Some explanations have already been given. We have come together because we all share, for different reasons and in varying degrees, an uneasiness about something we call the present situation. Whether or not we are ready to say that God's in his heaven, we cry with one voice that all's not right with the world. I wish I could credit my colleagues with one further agreement, namely, that the present crisis is only superficially a conflict between democracy and totalitarianism in the political arena, or between individualism and collectivism in the economic sphere. If that were the full nature of the crisis, why should we waste time talking about science, philosophy and religion?

The fact that we have chosen to consider three major components of human culture should indicate that we all have a vague sense of cultural disorder as the root of our troubles, as the source of a threatening doom. Far from being prime movers, Hitler and Mus-

solini, or, if you wish, the Stalins and Chamberlains, are but paranoiac puppets, dancing for a moment on the crest of the wave—the wave that is the historic motion of modern culture to its own destruction. A culture is not killed by political conflicts, even when they attain the shattering violence of modern warfare; nor by economic revolutions, even when they involve the dislocations of modern mass uprisings.

A culture dies of diseases which are themselves cultural. It may be born sick, as modern culture was, or it may decay through insufficient vitality to overcome the disruptive forces present in every culture; but, in any case, cultural disorder is a cause and not an effect of the political and economic disturbances which beset the world to day.

The health of a culture, like the health of the body, consists in the harmonious functioning of its parts. Science, philosophy and religion are certainly major parts of European culture; their distinction from one another as quite separate parts is certainly the most characteristic cultural achievement of modern times. But if they have not been properly distinguished, they cannot be properly related; and unless they are properly related, properly ordered to one another, cultural disorder, such as that of modern times, inevitably results.

This Conference, one might suppose, has been called to consider the illness of our culture; more than that, to seek and effect remedies. One of the troubles is that scientists, philosophers, and theologians, or teachers of religion, have long failed to communicate with one another.

The structure of a modern university, with its departmental separations, and its total lack of order among specialized disciplines, represents perfectly the disunity and chaos of modern culture. Since nothing can be expected of the professors locked up in their departmental cells, since reforming our institutions of higher learning (to make them truly universities) seems to be impossible, since the ordinary processes of academic life manifest the very defects which must be remedied, the professors have been assembled under the special auspices of this Conference with the hope that lines of communication can be established. That done, one might even hope for communication to lead to mutual understanding, and thence to agreement about the truths which could unify our culture.

If what I have said is not the purpose of this Conference, I can see no justification for it whatsoever. The fact that all the professors gathered mention the Present Crisis, without trying to agree about its nature and causes; the fact that they manifest some concern about Democracy, without trying to define it and understand its roots; the fact that, in a baffling variety of senses, they refer to Science, Philosophy and Religion, without trying to solve the intricate problem of the relationship of these disciplines,—all this amounts to nothing.

An undertaking of this sort is not needed to make professors think or talk this way. Nor is it needed to give them an opportunity to write and read papers which do credit to their specialized scholarly achievements. Unless this be a Conference in more than name only, unless it be a concerted effort to reach a common understanding of our cultural failure and a common program for its reform, this gathering will be as vacuous and futile as many another solemn conclave of professors, advertised by high-sounding and promising titles.

But if I have stated the only purpose which might justify this Conference, then I must also say that it cannot possibly succeed. I do not bother to say that a conference, however good, cannot succeed in reforming modern culture, or even in correcting one of the main causes of its disorder, namely, modern education. That goes without saying. To expect such results would be to ask too much from even the best of all possible conferences. I mean, much more directly, that one cannot expect the professors to understand what is wrong with modern culture and modern education, for the simple reason that that would require them to understand what is wrong with their own mentality.

If such a miracle could be hoped for, I would not be without hope for a peaceful deliverance from our manifold confusions. Since professors come to a conference of this sort with the intention of speaking their minds but not of changing them, with a willingness to listen but not to learn, with the kind of tolerance which delights in a variety of opinions and abominates the unanimity of agreement, it is preposterous to suppose that this Conference can even begin to realize the only ends which justify the enterprise.

Instead of a conference about science, philosophy and religion in relation to democracy, what is needed is a conference about the professors of science, philosophy and religion, especially Ameri-

can professors whose intellectual attitudes express a false conception of democracy. The defects of modern culture are the defects of its intellectual leaders, its teachers and savants. The disorder of modern culture is a disorder in their minds, a disorder which manifests itself in the universities they have built, in the educational system they have devised, in the teaching they do, and which, through that teaching, perpetuates itself and spreads out in ever widening circles from generation to generation. It is a little naive, therefore, to suppose that the professors can be called upon to solve the problem of the relationship of science, philosophy and religion in our education and in our culture—as naive as it would be to invite the professors to participate in a conference about what is wrong with the professors.

We do not even have to wait until this Conference is over to discover its futility and the reasons therefore. The glorious, Quixotic failure of President Hutchins to accomplish any of the essential reforms which American education so badly needs, demonstrates the point for us. In fact, if he could have succeeded, this Conference would not be necessary now. The fact that he did not succeed may make this Conference necessary, in the sense that fundamental rectification's of modern culture are imperative; but if we understand why, in the nature of the situation, Hutchins could not succeed, we also see why a conference of professors about the defects of the modern mentality must be self-defeating.

What did Mr. Hutchins propose? He proposed, in the first place, that man is a rational animal, essentially distinct from the brutes, and hence, that education should cultivate the moral and the intellectual virtues. He proposed, in the second place, that science, philosophy and theology are distinct bodies of knowledge, radically different as to methods of knowing as well as with respect to objects known. But he went further. He said that theoretic philosophy delves more deeply into the nature of things than all the empirical sciences; that, as theoretic knowledge, philosophy is superior to the sciences by reason of the questions it can answer. He said that practical philosophy, dealing with ethical and political problems, is superior to applied science, because the latter at best gives us control over the physical means to be used, whereas practical philosophy determines the ends to be sought, and the ordering of all means thereto.

Hence the structure of a university should not be a miscellaneous collection of departments from astronomy to zoology, with all

treated as equally important theoretically and practically, but a hierarchy of studies, ordered educationally according to their intrinsic merits. Because of the fact that our secular universities harbor a diversity of religious faiths, Mr. Hutchins placed metaphysics at the summit instead of theology. For man the highest knowledge, and the most indispensable to his well-being, is the knowledge of God; and since the ultimate conclusions of metaphysics comprise a natural theology, metaphysics is the supreme subject-matter in the domain of natural knowledge.

But Mr. Hutchins would have to admit (and he indicated his willingness to do so) that if there is a better knowledge of God, and man's relation to God, than metaphysics offers, then such knowledge is superior to philosophy, both theoretically and practically, just as philosophy is superior to science. Traditional Judaism and Christianity do, of course, claim that there is such knowledge, the sacred theology that rests on faith in God's revelation of Himself. It is properly distinguished from both science and philosophy as a supernatural knowledge, which man cannot have without God's direct aid.

Why did Mr. Hutchins fail? Anyone who has ever attended a faculty meeting knows the answer. It can be discovered by any one who will read the reviews of *The Higher Learning in America*, written by the professors, or what is worse, the professional educators. He failed not because his analysis was patiently demonstrated to be in error; not because someone proved that philosophy does not exist or is inferior to science; or that religion is superstition, and sacred theology a rationalization of some make-believe. He failed because he was asking the professors to change their minds and to agree about something. He failed as much with the professors of philosophy as with the professors of science; he failed even more with those teachers of religion who regard themselves as liberal.

What Hutchins proposed ran counter to every prejudice that constitutes the modern frame of mind, and its temper. The professors being in the vast majority, and ultimately controlling, as they should, educational policy, it was naive of Mr. Hutchins to suppose that he could reform education by appealing to truths the professors ignored or denied. Worse than naive, he had the effrontery to assume that if the professors were ignorant of certain truths or had neglected the implications of others, they would submit themselves to teaching on these points. Since the professors cannot conceive

themselves as being taught, certainly not by anyone without a Ph.D. in their field, the man who tries to argue with the plain intention of winning agreement must really be trying to impose his doctrine. The simplest way to deal with a fellow like Hutchins is to call him a fascist.

Now I want to make one thing absolutely clear. I am not begging the question in this issue between Mr. Hutchins and his opponents, by proceeding as if I have proved the former right and the latter wrong. I know I have not proved the truth of any of the theses mentioned, nor have I proved the falsity of their contraries. With the time at my disposal that would be impossible to do under any circumstances; and even with much more time I would not try with this audience.

With a few notable exceptions, the members of this Conference represent the American academic mind. It is that fact itself which makes it unnecessary, as well as unwise, for me to make any effort in the way of reasoning. I know too well, from much experience, the opinions of this audience, and of all the professors they represent—about the nature and relationship of science, philosophy and religion.

I also know, because I have tried so many times to present an analysis with the fullest of supporting arguments, precisely what reactions such procedure calls forth. Fortunately, there is no need to verify this once again, because on this occasion I am concerned only to show the futility of a conference of professors about science, philosophy and religion.

That can be shown very simply. Either the prevailing opinions of the professors are right or they are wrong. Let us suppose, for the moment, that they are right, that what is now generally taught in American schools about the relation of science, philosophy and religion, is the true account. If it is true, there is nothing wrong with modern culture, for modern culture, in all its practices and institutions, embodies these opinions. On this alternative, therefore, it is difficult to see why there should be any conference about science, philosophy and religion.

If, however, on the other alternative, the prevailing professorial opinions on these matters are wrong, and if, in addition, modern culture suffers grave disorders precisely because it embodies these opinions, then there is some point to a conference which would

seek to correct the prevalent errors. But then it is point less to ask the professors to consider the problem. They have already considered it and told us their answers in all their teaching and all their educational decisions. The same majority point of view will dominate this Conference, as in the Hutchins controversy.

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