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Man, Sex, God, and Yale

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered at Hillsdale College on September 20, 2012.

In 1951, William F. Buckley, Jr., a graduate of Yale the year before, published his first book, *God & Man at Yale*. In the preface, he described two ideas that he had brought with him to Yale and that governed his view of the world:

I had always been taught, and experience had fortified the teachings, that an active faith in God and a rigid adherence to Christian principles are the most powerful influences toward the good life. I also believed, with only a scanty knowledge of economics, that free enterprise and limited government had served this country well and would probably continue to do so in the future.

The body of the book provided evidence that the academic agenda at Yale was openly antagonistic to those two ideas—that Buckley had encountered a teaching and a culture that were hostile to religious faith and that promoted collectivism over free market individualism. Rather than functioning as an open forum for ideas, his book argued, Yale was waging open war upon the faith and principles of its alumni and parents.

Liberal bias at American colleges and universities is something we hear a lot about today. At the time, however, Buckley’s exposé was something new, and it stirred national controversy. The university counterattacked, and Yale trustee Frank Ashburn lambasted Buckley and his book in the pages of *Saturday Review* magazine.

Whether *God & Man at Yale* had any effect on Yale’s curriculum is debatable, but its impact on American political history is indisputable. It argued for a connection between the cause of religious faith on the one hand, and the cause of free market economics on the other. In a passage whose precise wording was later acknowledged to have been the work of Buckley’s mentor Willmoore Kendall—a conservative political scientist who was driven out of Yale a few years later—Buckley wrote:

I consider this battle of educational theory important and worth time and thought even in the context of a world situation that seems to render totally irrelevant any fight except the power struggle against Communism. I myself believe that the duel between Christianity and atheism is the most important in the world. I further believe that the struggle between individualism and collectivism is the same struggle reproduced on another level.

This idea, later promoted as “fusionism” in Buckley’s influential magazine

National Review, would become the germ of the Reagan coalition that united social conservatives and free market libertarians—a once-winning coalition that has been lately unraveling.

I graduated from Yale in 2009, fifty-nine years after Buckley. I had a chance to meet him a couple of years before his death, at a small gathering at the home of a professor. Little did I know at the time that I would write a book of my own that would serve, in some ways, as a continuation of his famous critique.

My book—which I entitled *Sex and God at Yale*—shows that Yale’s liberals are still actively working to refashion American politics and culture. But the devil is in the details, and it’s safe to say that there are things happening at Yale today that Buckley could scarcely have even imagined in 1951. While the Yale of Buckley’s book marginalized or undermined religious faith in the classroom, my book tells of a classmate who was given approval to create an art

object out of what she claimed was blood and tissue from self-induced abortions. And while the Yale of Buckley’s book was promoting socialist ideas in its economics department, my book chronicles Yale’s recent employment of a professor who publicly praised terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

My, how times have changed!

There is clearly a radical sexual agenda at work at Yale today. Professors and administrators who came of age during the sexual revolution are busily indoctrinating students into a culture of promiscuity. In fact, Yale pioneered the

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[Latin]: in the first place

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hosting of a campus “Sex Week”—a festival of sleaze, porn, and debauchery, dressed up as sex education. I encountered this tawdry tradition as an undergrad, and my book documents the events of Sex Week, including the screening in classrooms of hard-core pornography and the giving of permission to sex toy manufacturers and porn production companies to market their products to students.

In one classroom, a porn star stripped down to bare breasts, attached pinching and binding devices to herself as a lesson in sadomasochism, and led a student around the room in handcuffs. On other occasions, female students competed in a porn star look-alike contest judged by a male porn producer, and a porn film showing a woman bound and beaten was screened in the context of “instruction” on how students might engage in relationships of their own.

And again, these things happened with the full knowledge and approval of Yale’s senior administrators.

As might be expected, many Yale students were offended by Sex Week, but university officials defended it in the name of “academic freedom”—a sign of how far this noble idea, originally meant to protect the pursuit of truth, has fallen. And the fact that Yale as an institution no longer understands the substantive meaning of academic freedom—which requires the ability to distinguish art from pornography, not to mention right from wrong—is a sign of its enslavement to the ideology of moral relativism, which denies any objective truth (except, of course, for the truth that there is no truth).

Under the dictates of moral relativism, no view is any more valid than any other view, and no book is any greater or more worth reading than any other book. Thus the old idea of a liberal education—that each student would study the greatest books, books organized into a canon based on objective criteria that identify them as valuable—has given way to a hodgepodge of new disciplines—African-American Studies,

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Latino Studies, Native American Studies, Women’s Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies—based on the assumption that there is no single way to describe the world that all serious and open-minded students can comprehend.

Indeed, Yale administrators have taken their allegiance to cultural relativism so far that they invited a sworn enemy of America to be a student, admitting Sayed Rahmatulla Hashemi—a former diplomat-at-large for the Taliban—in 2005. Talk about diversity!

Sitting for my final exam in International Relations, I found myself next to Hashemi, whose comrades were fighting and killing my fellow citizens in the mountains of Afghanistan at that very moment. The fact that the Taliban publicly executes homosexuals and infidels, and denies girls and women the right to go to school, gave no pause to the same Yale administrators who pride themselves on their commitment to gay rights, feminism, and academic freedom. In an interview, Hashemi boasted to the *New York Times*: “I could have ended up in Guantanamo Bay. Instead, I ended up at Yale.”

It’s hard to overlook the paradox: By enrolling Hashemi in the name of diversity, Yale abandoned the principle of human rights—the very principle that allows diverse individuals, including those of different faiths, to coexist peacefully.

It was my aim in writing *Sex and God at Yale* to bring accountability to Yale’s leaders in hopes of reform. Yale has educated three of the last four presidents, and two of the last three justices appointed to the Supreme Court. What kind of leaders will it be supplying in ten years, given its current direction?

Unfortunately, what’s happening at Yale is indicative of what is occurring at colleges and universities across the

country. Sex Week, for example, is being replicated at Harvard, Brown, Duke, Northwestern, the University of Illinois, and the University of Wisconsin. Nor would it suffice to demand an end to Sex Weeks on America's college campuses. Those events are, after all, only symptoms of a deeper emptiness in modern academia. Our universities have lost touch with the purpose of liberal arts education, the pursuit of truth. In abandoning that mission—indeed, by denying its possibility—our institutions of higher learning are afflicted to the core.

The political freedom that makes a liberal arts education possible requires an ongoing and active defense of liberty. Try exercising academic freedom in a place like Tehran or Kabul! Here in the U.S., we take our liberty far too much for granted. To the extent that Yale and schools like it succeed in producing leaders who subscribe to the ideology of moral relativism—and who thus see no moral distinction between America and its enemies—we will likely be disabused of this false sense of security all too soon. ■

“We live in a culture of Peter Pans”

Jason Barney

Latin Teacher, Clapham School

EACH FALL, Hillsdale College awards the Salvatori Prize for Excellence in Teaching to a teacher at a private or charter K-12 school that offers a classical education in keeping with the guidelines of Hillsdale's Charter School Initiative and of Hillsdale Academy, the College's private K-12 school. The 2012 Salvatori Prize was awarded to Jason Barney, a Latin teacher at Clapham School in Wheaton, Illinois, who accepted the prize and a \$25,000 check for his school at a ceremony at Hillsdale College on November 12, 2012. The following is adapted from his acceptance remarks.

I am honored to receive the Salvatori Prize on behalf of my school, and grateful for the good work and generosity of Hillsdale College and Hillsdale Academy in supporting educational reform that reaches back to the best of our tradition. My own young school, founded only seven years ago, has drawn inspiration and resources from Hillsdale, which has paved the way in retrieving much that has been forgotten or abandoned. Without your support and example, we would be years behind in our growth as a school.

The great Roman statesman, orator, and philosopher Marcus Tullius

Cicero wrote: *Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum.* “Not to know what happened before you were born, that is to be always a boy, to be forever a child.”

In a sense, historical understanding—knowledge of what happened before you were born—is primary to all realms of knowledge. Science is the study of the great discoveries of the past in our knowledge of the natural world. Literature is the study of the great writings of past cultures that embody human experience in the form of story and poem. Mathematics is the study of how great minds of the past have ordered



Jason Barney receives the 2012 Salvatori Prize for Excellence in Teaching from Ken Calvert, headmaster of Hillsdale Academy; Douglas Reynolds, principal of the Clapham School, looks on.

for us the use of abstract numbers and symbols in relation to the physical world. The arts are the studies of the varied and diverse cultural creations of the past. Historical understanding in all these areas humanizes, matures, and uplifts the soul.

Too many citizens of our country today are, in Cicero's terms, forever children. If knowledge of the past matures the soul, it is not something we can afford to marginalize or sideline. Unfortunately, the hard work of gaining knowledge, eloquence, and wisdom is all too often skirted by teacher and student alike. Because we have neglected knowledge of the past and the great tradition of historical understanding, we live in a culture of Peter Pans, flying free in Neverland with no past and no future, only the ever-present game, the mock battle against pirates or Indians. Wendy's stories, with their plot of real challenges to be overcome, only reveal to us our immaturity, the fact that we are forever children who won't grow up.

In my short professional tenure as a teacher, I have had the privilege of seeing students mature through coming to know the past. After numerous classroom discussions about the

virtues and vices of historical figures, making charts and lists on the board as my students came up with ideas, they have written profoundly of their desire to mature in their own lives, discerning their own weaknesses and taking steps to improve. After discussing and chuckling at the social dynamics of Jane Austen's *Emma*—expressing distaste for Mrs. Elton's haughty manner, admiration for Mr. Knightley's gentleness, good-natured exasperation at Emma's silly lack of self-awareness—I have witnessed the change in my students' relationships with one another: a more mature thoughtfulness, a deeper sensitivity. Nothing is more satisfying for a teacher than seeing how interaction with the stories of the past matures the souls of his students.

As G.K. Chesterton said in another context, the great tradition has not been tried and found wanting; it has been tried, found difficult, and duly abandoned.

Hillsdale Academy is a model to schools across the nation, including my own, of taking the difficult path, rediscovering the great tradition, and finding in the wisdom of the past a deep well of life-giving water.

Thank you. ■



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DID YOU KNOW?

Hillsdale College's Charter School Initiative supports the launching of K-12 charter schools which are based on a classical liberal arts model. For further information contact Initiative Director Phil Kilgore at pkilgore@hillsdale.edu.