

Three Ideas That Have Failed Public Education and American Society

By Eric Buehrer

Modern thought has emphasized emotion over reason. Humanism, existentialism, and pragmatism ironically, in the name of living by reason, have brought about living by passions and in the name of freedom have brought on bondage in people's lives. As the Apostle Peter so eloquently points out, "While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same he is brought in bondage."

1. Secular Humanism declares there is no God: man is the measure of all things. Whatever he desires is right for him. Education is, then, about learning to live in a world where God either does not exist or, if He exists, is irrelevant. Laws need not conform to any higher standard than what men of the moment desire.

The Bible declares that there is only one God. The Ten Commandments begin: "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" (Exodus 20:3) Monotheism brings order to society. One God means one set of rules to live by.

In his book, *Who Needs God*, Rabbi Harold Kushner writes:

"We modern people tend to be uncomfortable with laws. We see them as confining, taking away our freedoms. I sometimes think the essence of the modern outlook is 'this is a free country, and nobody is going to tell me what to do.'...Our love of freedom makes it hard for us to understand someone like the author of Psalm 119 who speaks of loving the law and being grateful for it. The psalmist loves the law...because he is happier living in a world where people feel addressed and summoned by God. It is law that keeps us from returning to the jungle, to a situation where the strongest take what they want..."

"...Just as the world would be unlivable if we could not count on the reliability of the law of gravity and other laws of chemistry and physics, the world of our social relationships would be unlivable if we could not accept

certain standards of behavior as being right and necessary even when we do not feel like living up to them."

2. Existentialism views life as largely meaningless. Meaning is only derived from our existence and existence is only affirmed by our choices. It is the act of choosing, not the result of the choice that is the moral thing, according to the existentialist. Immorality is defined as anything that hinders your act of choosing what you desire. It, then, becomes moral to have the freedom to choose your own death, choose your own gender preference, and choose to abort or keep your pre-born child. Education, then, is about becoming "authentic" – true to yourself. Decision-making skills teach only a process of exploring and affirming choices. Morality is seen as only personal. In this philosophical environment a person becomes alienated from his neighbor because everyone threatens his freedom to choose. As the famous French existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre quipped, "Hell is other people."

This is a type of freedom. But in the end, it is only freedom to be alone. Free to be meaningless.

Judeo-Christian truth is vital for today's society because it emphasizes that freedom comes from the ability to govern ourselves by divinely established standards of virtue. Benjamin Franklin once said:

"Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters."

John Adams stated:

"Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

Samuel Adams agreed when he emphasized:

"Neither the wisest constitution nor the wisest laws will secure the liberty and happiness of a people whose manners are universally corrupt."

Without personal virtue all the laws in the world can only dictate punishment, they cannot empower a person to right conduct. The Apostle Peter wrote: “*Act as free men, not a cloak for doing evil, but live as bondslaves to God.*” He taught that true freedom comes from bondage to God in our hearts.

3. Pragmatism is the belief that truth is defined by utility. If it is not practical, if it serves no useful purpose, it is not true nor of value. Education, then, becomes learning to do, not think. Education is seen as a tool of the State to produce more productive workers rather than more elevated souls.

All three of these philosophies dominate our educational, judicial and political establishment. Yet, in the end, they reduce men to becoming slaves of their passions. Today, we find ourselves in a world described so eloquently by C.S. Lewis in his book, *The Abolition Of Man*:

“...such is the tragi-comedy of our situation—we continue to clamor for those very qualities we render impossible. You can hardly open a periodical without coming across the statement that what our civilization needs is more ‘drive’ or dynamism, or self-sacrifice, or ‘creativity.’ In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”

Today we hear calls for character education, anti-drug morality to be taught, and are shocked at poor character of our young people. Yet, we laugh at those who recommend a return to our moral and cultural roots in the education of our young.

The Judeo-Christian view of Man is that he is made in the image of God. The point of education is, then, about righteousness and refinement. Education is about uplifting the soul not just raising your income.

We must progress to a higher level in our society. We have wallowed in the wasteland of selfish philosophy long enough. Humanism, existentialism, and pragmatism are inadequate for the 21st century. The proverb says, “*Like a dog that returns to its vomit, is a fool who repeats his folly.*”

Paul Johnson, a best-selling historian of the late 20th century, reminds us, “*One of the principal lessons of our*

tragic century, which has seen so many millions of innocent lives sacrificed in schemes to improve the lot of humanity, is - beware the intellectuals.”

Johnson isn't telling us to remove our brains and stop thinking. Instead, he is warning us that the man who believes he can improve the lot of society with nothing more than his reason, is a fool and will only bring more harm to his fellow man.

Secular Humanism, existentialism, pragmatism all fail in their promise of happiness and fulfillment for the individual or for society. All of them fail to give a just road map for government or society. Yet, they are powerful undercurrents within our classrooms.

Biblical Reason

The Judeo-Christian philosophy upon which this country was founded teaches us that no matter what our passions burn for at the moment, no matter what we think at the time is the most pragmatic course of action, Right and Wrong, noble and base, justice and injustice are truths established by God. This secures man from abuse by his fellow man. This forms what Thomas Jefferson referred to as unalienable rights.

Flowing from the Judeo-Christian belief system is a logical and reasoned system of self-government. Choices for the person aligned to Judeo-Christian principles are reasoned from a starting point of fixed moral orientation. The “Modern Man,” on the other hand, tries to be logical and rational but he finds it difficult when his passions cause him to change his starting point as the winds of opinion and consensus change. Though he believes he is being rational because he is logically acting upon his belief system, he is really only being emotional because his belief system is based upon his passions. He does not use rational thoughts, but rationalizations.

The nature of Man is tending toward corruption, selfishness and vice. The need of Man is for redemption and refinement. Redemption must take place outside of the public institution but it should not be hindered nor discouraged by that institution.

Refinement certainly is the call of public education. Since we are basically corrupt, refinement involves conformity to moral standards as well as the taming and sharpening of our academic faculties. To the degree that we align to Judeo-Christian, Biblical principles in this process of redemption and refinement will be the degree to which we create a better, saner society and a more hopeful future for the children of today. ■