

Introduction

If the twentieth century was a stream rushing madly toward a maelstrom, Bernard Iddings Bell, a champion of orthodoxy, swam defiantly against the flow. What he withstood was the violent current of modernity that threatens to crush any non-utilitarian concept of life—the humane traditions that support civilization. He embraced Christianity and believed that, because God created them, men and women are fundamentally religious beings whose real world exists in a common creaturehood of the spirit. He opposed revelation to naturalism, faith to doubt, authority to personality, wisdom to mere knowledge. He was no intellectual trimmer, no moral eclectic, and certainly no fashionable nihilist. He was a staunch conservator who called his contemporaries back to what is vital to the human condition.

Bell made this call most deliberately in some twenty controversial books in which he rigorously examined the cultural manifestations of the muddled modern mind. Among his principal works are *Right and Wrong After the War* (1918), *Postmodernism and Other Essays* (1926), *Beyond Agnosticism* (1929), *Unfashionable Convictions* (1931), *In the City of Confusion* (1938), *The Church in Disrepute* (1943), *God Is Not Dead* (1945), and *Crisis in Education* (1949). These insightful little books attracted considerable attention when they were published, many of them beginning as articles in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Commonweal*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*.

By 1950, Bell, an ordained priest in the Episcopal church, was known as one of the most distinguished Christian writers in America, and he was admired by some of the more formidable conservatives of the time, men such as Albert J. Nock, T. S. Eliot, and Richard M. Weaver. Writing before the rise of academic specialization, few theologians have reached as wide and diverse a public as Bell did during the first half of the last century. His audience extended to England and Canada, where he frequently toured and read from his works. His books deeply influenced a number of prominent men and women of letters, including a young Russell Kirk who placed Bell in the "literary party of order," that faction of writers past, present, and to come for whom the order of the soul is paramount.

Like Kirk, Bell was ashamed of the last century and its patrimonial squandering. Yet, to be ashamed of having been born into the twentieth century was—for both men—to be, in some sense at least, a decent human being in an age of indecency. As Kirk tells us in his memoir *The Sword of Imagination*, Bell was a prophet for the age, "an Isaiah preaching to the Remnant," a High Churchman who conceded nothing "to the social gospellers, liberals, latitudinarians, modernists, humanitarians, or public-relations experts." Bell, writes Kirk—who praised but few as unreservedly as he did his hierophantic friend—was "so hot against entrenched selfishness and stupidity" that he was once accused of being a communist. He was so averse to collectivism that he was "denounced as an apologist for reaction." Such derision, Kirk hastens to add, delighted Bell, who rejoiced in an intellectual skirmish. "No one...ever had the better of him in a battle of wits." Although quick to fight, Bell was always ready to forgive, and to be forgiven. He was, in Kirk's words, "a man of honor—jealous of his own honor, scrupulous in distinguishing persons from opinions."

Born on 13 October 1886, in Dayton, Ohio, Bell was the son of Charles Wright and Vienna Valencia (Iddings) Bell. He received a B.A. in 1907 from the University of Chicago, where he majored in social history, took part in plays, wrote for sundry college publications, and survived a severe bout of skepticism by reading G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*. He studied religion at Western Theological Seminary (which later became Seabury Western Seminary), where he graduated in 1912 with a bachelor's degree in sacred theology. In 1919, after serving as vicar and dean of St. Paul's Church in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, he accepted an offer to preside as warden at St. Stephen's

College (now Bard College) in New York, a position he held until 1933. While at St. Stephen's he taught religion at Columbia University. As canon of St. John's Cathedral in Rhode Island, as canon of the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Illinois, and as William Vaughn Moody Lecturer at the University of Chicago, Bell dedicated his later years to the religious training of adults and to teaching in the classroom. In 1958 he left this life for the next, bequeathing precious little by which to remember him but the books through which he tried to reach an age which he knew was getting and spending itself to death.

Until now, all of these books were out of print. Like so many sapient voices of the last century, Bell's has been dinned out of hearing by what W. B. Yeats called "the noisy set...the martyrs call the world." The reign of error in academia and publishers in the clutch of a secularist ideology have muted the minority voice whose point of view challenges the current melioristic Weltanschauung. This suppression is lamentable as it further reveals the liberal bias so prevalent in American culture. Few who now profess the humanities have heard the name Bernard Iddings Bell. But most, alas, are quite familiar with John Dewey, whose radical democratization of education Bell courageously excoriated. Given academe's hegemonic dominion over the presses and popular opinion, it should surprise no one that, while over thirty works by Professor Dewey remain in print, Bell's books have long been unpurchasable.

To be sure, Bell's books can be found scattered upon the dustier shelves of many good libraries across the country. However, they ought to be for sale in America's best bookstores. Many of them are as pertinent today as when they were written, and if the coming decades are as spiritually dry and philosophically disoriented as the last half of the twentieth century, these books will retain their relevance. In each, Bell tempers his independence of thought with the wisdom of the human race and proceeds with faith, hope, and charity-as a believing Christian who loves human beings and refuses to despair. Nor does he ignore the latest discoveries of science or fail to consider modern philosophy and popular psychology. Nonetheless, he does not write as a modernist, for the modernist offers no remedy to the moral problems that plague contemporary man. Rather, Bell writes as a diagnostician of the moral commonwealth, as a critic with the courage to judge.

Of all his books, *Crowd Culture*, reprinted here for the first time in over thirty years, stands as Bell's greatest achievement. *Crowd Culture* is a feat of Chestertonian strength, written for the everlasting man. Moreover, it is Bell's most essential work. Here in four limpid chapters, published originally six years before his death, is a condensation of his thought on the culture of consumption, the slums of mass education, the misguided modernization of the church, and the intelligent but humble resistance of the few. "What Bell has said in this book," wrote Eliot in a review, "he will say, I hope, again and again; and if he says it often enough, and if people begin saying the same things, there may be some changes for the better in 25 or 50 years." With the present reprint, Bell speaks out yet again. He speaks to the thoughtful of the current generation, just as he spoke to three preceding generations of thinking men and women.

Bell minces no words in this apt commentary on the American way of life. In "The Cultural Picture," he notes that "ours is a nation of new-rich people, well-washed, all dressed up, rather pathetically unsure just what it is dressed up for; a nation convinced that a multitude of material goods, standardized, furiously and expensively advertised by appeals to greed and vanity, will in themselves make life worth the living." Obviously, Bell believed that Americans are, in general, crass and crude. They are crass and crude not because they want intelligence or technological ingenuity; they are undeniably clever and scientifically more advanced than any other people. No,

they are crass and crude because they no longer interest themselves in eternal questions and ultimate concerns.

Being unused to money and therefore easily deceived by its glitter, Americans, of the kind Bell depicts in *Crowd Culture*, too often confuse happiness with purchasable commodities, and fail to realize that genuine happiness transcends the realm of advertisement. What the old-rich know about money, Bell observes, the new-rich realize, if at all, only after they have grown accustomed to their earthly possessions. Those who never accustom themselves sacrifice their lives, and even their children, to the gods of the world and of the flesh.

Implicated in what Bell considers the world are not the wonders of nature, not the creative labors of pious men and women, not the pursuit of sapience with which to live humanely, but the "nonsense of supposing that externalities possessed ennoble the owners, that a full fist invariably indicates a fine spirit." The object of the average man of the world-of the crowd-is neither justice nor liberty; it is, on the contrary, money and recognition. Bell reminds us that the defining characteristic of any culture is its cult-its religion-and the predominant cult in America is none other than the world of personality. What Americans erect as their object of perpetual adoration is the man or woman with money, the mundane movie star, the overpaid professional athlete.

Americans believe, and teach their children to believe, that the wealthiest of the crowd are good and virtuous, and that the child who is good and virtuous will be wealthy by that very fact. Anyone, Bell objects, who knows the true meaning of goodness and virtue surely recognizes the error of this belief. Every sage of moral vision has warned that greedily amassed fortunes tend to isolate their owners, to render them vulnerable, a bit trifling if not a little ludicrous. One who takes time to study the lives of the truly great figures who have risen above the world knows that wealth is rarely the reward for pursuing the good and the virtuous. Bell himself committed his life to serving others and defending seemingly lost causes only to die blind and poor.

In sacrificing himself to the gods of the flesh, the average American worships comfort. He sets up comfort as the summum bonum, and he does so because he proceeds from the premise that man must surmount all suffering to fulfill his destiny. This premise is false, as Bell asserts time and again in the succeeding chapters, because it is based on the positivistic belief that, if man could only perfect his environment and eliminate all human suffering, he could, in the process, remake himself. Such is the operative premise of the mechanist who, according to Bell, refuses to accept that one must of necessity struggle to become and remain human. The mechanistic view contradicts the Christian understanding of human nature based on the doctrine of original sin. Moreover, it denies the reality of the human soul, which is, in truth, tested and forged by quotidian trials and perturbations. While Americans of true character recognize the absurdity of the mechanistic premise, "all too few," writes Bell, "ask whether it can possibly be that, since our primeval ancestors crawled from the slime of the sea, first the animal world and then the human race have struggled on, at cost of travail and pain and tears and death, merely that modern man may sit down and be comfortable."

Most Americans rarely ask such questions because they resemble the "vertical intruder" that Ortega y Gasset envisages in *The Revolt of the Masses*, an illuminating commentary which Bell lauded as one of those books that one must read to understand the cultural development of modern times. The crowd-loving American, like Ortega's vertical intruder, has invaded civilization from the basement and taken possession of the drawing room. "This is to the good," Bell admits, "but possession of the drawing room is not of great value, is often embarrassing, to the Common Man, unless he has learned how to use the drawing room, unless he knows the amenities." The schools and the churches, those institutions which Bell deems most capable of showing America's vertical

intruder how to behave in civilization's upper rooms, have so far failed to train those who might otherwise prevent what may ultimately be the uncivil destruction of the whole house.

That the schools were failing America was painfully clear to a handful of thinkers who expressed concern early in the last century. In 1908, Irving Babbitt underscored the root causes of this failing in his prescient book *Literature and the American College*. Seven years later, in *Aristocracy and Justice*, Paul Elmer More wrote: "We must get back to a common understanding of the office of education in the construction of society and must discriminate among the subjects that may enter into the curriculum by their relative value towards this end."

Skeptical though they were, Babbitt and More at least considered education redeemable. By 1930, however, Bell and others in the literary party of order were convinced that the schools had lost any common assumptions as to the aim of education. To them the universities in particular appeared to be in such a state of anomie that nothing short of divine intervention could save them from disaster. One might hope, said Eliot in his 1933 address to the Classical Club of Harvard, that America's universities would eventually learn to follow what is timeless, time-tested, and time-honored, "or be relegated to preservation as curious architectural remains; but they cannot be expected to lead." At the modern university it is virtually impossible for a young soul to get a genuine "critical, literary education," remarked Allen Tate in a 1940 essay. The student of mass education is unable to discuss a work of literature "in terms of its specific form; all he can do is to give you its history or tell you how he feels about it." If one goes to graduate school, declared Tate, "he comes out incapacitated for criticism; if he tries to be a critic he is not unlike the ignorant impressionist who did not go to graduate school."

Having been an elementary school teacher, a high school teacher, and a college professor and president, Bell was well acquainted with the failings of modern education. What is more, he was determined to expose the party responsible for these failings, the party of John Dewey. Schools predicated upon "Dewey's philosophy or any other relativistic philosophy are," as Bell put it, "only too likely to produce alumni who have no definite standards of right and wrong, who judge words and deeds only by whether they seem expedient in a given, temporary, set of circumstances."

If such alumni seem to be the norm today, they are so because the academics who taught them are, as Bell reminds us, Dewey's apostles and, in their apostolic succession, the bane of education. Deweyism was-and still is-a formidable force. Yet Bell stood boldly against its degrading tendencies, and with the first publication of *Crowd Culture* he found many allies. Russell Kirk hoped and prayed that these allies might well-nigh "cleanse the intellectual sty in the closing years of the twentieth century." They did not, however. The job remains to be done. Today, America needs at least a dozen more reformers of Bell's ilk to lead it out of the same, if superficially altered, crisis in education with which Bell deals in "The School."

In this chapter Bell reveals what he believes to be an undeniable correlation between the manner in which Americans are illiberally educated and their apparent inability to conduct themselves as gentle men and women. He observes that what traditionally distinguished the gentle man and woman from their common counterparts was not that the former possessed more worldly goods than the latter (for often the gentle man and woman were anything but wealthy). What distinguished the former from the latter was that the gentle man and woman had, while the common man and woman lacked, a principled education informed by what Chateaubriand called the genius of Christianity, an education which had as its end the realization of a unifying vision of nature and man's place in it. Granted, the gentle man and woman, the natural leaders of the people, did not always govern justly. But having studied civilization and the moral precepts that make it possible, they at least governed intelligently.

Although Bell affirms the right of the common man and woman to govern themselves, he insists that they can do so responsibly, and with dignity, only if they are humanely educated. Here, he quotes Thomas Jefferson: "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion by education." For Bell, informing the discretion of the people entails, first and foremost, instructing them in the ways of virtue. The people must be led to understand "that both the making of their souls and also their most real service to our country depend upon their finding deliverance for themselves from the pursuit of such obvious and ostentatious trivialities as satisfy the masses at the moment." Moreover, informing their discretion requires that those who do the instructing remember that the proper study of mankind is man—nothing more, and certainly nothing less.

It is, at bottom, this fact that the modern academic has forgotten, particularly at the university where, according to Bell, one finds an increasing number of tenured neoterists bent on subverting what was once viewed as the true and the good. While he respected meaningful scholarship, supported and involved himself in the perennial pursuit of knowledge, Bell felt that in many ways academe was fast becoming an asylum for half-educated intellectuals who, having cut themselves loose from all religious moorings, pursued erudition only as a means to avoid the Absolute. He knew that many university professors are committed nominalists who believe, and would have everybody else believe, that universals such as truth, justice, and salvation exist in name only, as nothing more than human desiderata; that reality exists in the subjective mind alone; that there are as many universes as there are minds thinking them into existence; that the transcendent and organizing center of language cannot hold because there never was a transcendent center in the first place; that in the beginning there was nada, and nada was with nada, and nada was nada.

Because he thought that any activity related to education, whether pedagogical or scholarly in kind, ought to be completed from a definite moral point of view, Bell naturally abhorred the intransigent postmodern tenet that all views are relative. He discerned correctly that the teacher who holds such an erroneous opinion has grown bored with the proper study of mankind. And, moreover, students under the tutelage of such a one are certain to confuse right with wrong, virtue with vice, good with evil, authority with force, having no fixed axioms by which to orient themselves in the flux.

The academics whom Bell indicts have replaced the study of man with the study of progress. Although they deny the existence of absolutes, they paradoxically subscribe absolutely to the notion that the man of today is a fundamentally different creature from the man of five hundred years ago. All that they teach in the classroom derives from this assumption, an assumption that goes, more often than not, unchallenged. It would be one thing were the crowd alone enchanted by the idea of progress. That the supposedly educated and wiser members of society promote progress as an incontrovertible principle by which to live is quite another. Its establishment as such proves once again that what begins in the ivory towers of higher learning soon becomes accepted as truth in the thoroughfares of America. Moreover, the unexamined acceptance of progress as a truism to be acknowledged by all belies the hope that falsehood will be exposed in the proverbial marketplace of ideas. Of all the suppositions peddled as absolute truth, the myth of progress, Bell contends, is by far one of the most insidious.

Until the myth of progress comes under scrutiny, the American student, Bell warns, will remain a provincial of contemporaneity, unable and disinclined to reform himself, much less society, in light of the perennial truths about the nature and destiny of mankind that have guided

men through the centuries. Only when he sees man as he has been, says Bell, can the student begin to know man as he is. And he can see most vividly what man has been by immersing himself in the Western literary tradition. To teach the myth of progress and those attendant studies that reduce the pursuit of genuine liberal learning to narrowly focused discussions (on, say, race, class, and gender) instead of imparting the wisdom of the noble dead is, as Bell intimates throughout the middle chapters of this book, to rob the student of his intellectual inheritance, or as Paul Elmer More puts it, to debauch his "mind with a flabby, or inflame it with a frantic, humanitarianism."

In having truckled to humanitarianism, the churches, Bell argues, have become as ineffectual as the academy in providing America with the kind of citizens it sorely needs. Bell accuses contemporary churches of ceasing, on the whole, to perform "the primary task of confronting mundane cultures with external morality, confronting a failing world with God." In their misguided attempts to be "up-to-date," he says, churches of all denominations have gradually conformed themselves to the ways of unregenerate man. What the clergy have forgotten in their diffident acquiescence to the demands of popular culture is that God expects his church to be something more than a "promoter of a respectable minor art, charming if it happens to appeal to you, its only moral function to bless whatever the multitude at the moment regards as the American way of life." God intends his church to be nothing less than "His mystical Body, made up of those committed to the task of moral resistance to the world."

What many lay people really want to hear from the pulpit, as Bell knew from firsthand experience as a cleric, is not the tedious chant of progress, but instead the resounding note of faith in everlasting truths. What alienates those who seek the truly sacred is not that the churches are too religious, but that many of them are simply not religious enough. Those who look to the churches for spiritual answers to what ails their souls too often find that the so-called religious leaders have degenerated into what Bell describes as little private chaplains of the worldly, flattering and validating the irreverent lives of their patrons.

Carried along by the obstreperous currents of popular culture, the very Christians who pride themselves on their "contemporary worship services," are, Bell believed, complicit in the profanation of the sacred, in the estrangement of secularly educated adolescents, and in the erection of American institutions on pragmatic rather than permanent principles. Modern Christians of the kind Bell takes to task in *Crowd Culture* have become, most regrettably, "an uncommitted host of politely respectable people, willing to be led by professional ecclesiastics whose methods of promotion and administration are just about as worldly as those of the sick society they say they wish to reform but which, as a matter of fact, deforms them almost as easily as it deforms everybody else."

Bell also discerns a lack of courage and conviction on the part of those Christians who are directly and indirectly responsible for providing America's youth with religious instruction. Most negligent, he says, are the parents. Influenced by the sophists of modernity, many parents help to perpetuate the false belief that religious instruction is anything but a necessary part of a balanced education. That religious training ought to play an important role in education is to most parents an obscure proposition.

America is in serious trouble, Bell cautions. Its way of life resembles what Plato envisioned as the epitome of radical egalitarianism: the father condescending to his children lest they shun him; the mother affecting their frivolous manners from fear of being thought dull or authoritarian; the child impudently contradicting his parents; the schoolmaster flattering his pupils; and the pupils despising their teachers and tutors. America, Bell warns, is mired in a provincialism not of country or county-but of time and spirit. Its schools serve the vagaries of demos. Its educators, full of

passionate intensity, circumscribe young, impressionable minds in an intellectually narrow presentism. Its churches make man the measure of all things and fail to redeem the fallen world by bringing the Eternal into the temporal. The religious seek to preserve themselves at the cost of unconscionable compromise. They are reluctant to speak the truth of God and man—nor do they appear sure just what that truth is. Their worship tends to be prosaic, their morality largely sentimental.

Faced with schools that reduce education to nothing other than job training, faced with churches singing alternative hymns instead of chanting creeds, faced with a pervasive and decadent popular culture—faced with all this, America, Bell maintains, is unlikely to recover its senses until a "democratic elite" rises up from the people to guide the crowd "into a more urbane and humane way of living." Avowing his hope that an elite of this kind would indeed emerge, he devoted the final chapter of *Crowd Culture* to an extensive description of the adversity such a group would have to overcome and the kind of education it would need in order to triumph.

Bell makes it clear that one who would join this band of rebels must first of all expect to be poor. He must also settle for scant recognition and little preferment for what he does, even when he works to improve institutions like universities and churches. Worst of all he must endure the scorn of his children, who may resent living in frugal contradistinction to their more fashionable neighbors. "Woe be to his wife," Bell writes, "if she be not devoted to the improvident ideals and purposes to the same degree as her husband." In brief, he who chooses to oppose the crowd must be willing to live as an ascetic, motivated by "much the same sort of impulse, and willingly embracing much the same sort of discipline, as are known to him who forsakes the secular world for the cloister." Unlike those who sequester themselves, however, he who chooses to guide the madding crowd must stand in its midst.

He must also receive as fine a liberal arts education as he possibly can. This end is not always achieved by way of formal schooling, says Bell. In fact, it is often hindered by organized, overly compartmentalized education. What is chiefly important is that the rebel keep in mind the object of learning. Although his education was at best rudimentary, Abraham Lincoln "taught himself," Bell points out, "and he made a good job of it largely because he knew the kind of understanding he was after and then with labor pursued the getting of it." Like Lincoln, he who would lead rather than follow the crowd must know the difference between genuine education and pseudo-education, between a good school and a bad one. Good schools can be a great boon; bad ones can do irreparable harm. This statement holds true at all levels of education.

Bell goes on to say that those who know the kind of learning they need to lead the crowd will not covet academic degrees. "Academic degrees are not significant," he says, "unless one knows in what fields they were taken, in what spirit the study was directed, for what ends it was undertaken and brought to completion." Working assiduously to earn a Ph.D. is surely a commendable exercise in discipline. "But discipline alone within some narrow field," says Bell, in words which echo Irving Babbitt's in *Literature and the American College*, "does not insure competence for living." Only a basic study of what it means to be human can insure that.

Nor will the aspirant who knows the importance of humane learning content himself by specializing in one abstract science or another, Bell continues, valuable though the sciences are. One may excel in one's knowledge of, say, thermodynamics and still be morally ignorant. Information for information's sake will not in and of itself help anyone to conserve civilization. As Bell argues in the final pages of this thin but insightful book, one needs information plus some basic metaphysical first principles "if one is to become fit to help direct a culture intelligently or even oneself to participate in a culture." The rebel that Bell visualizes will learn the significance of

such principles not from an intellectual flirtation with science and software, but from a disciplined study of created man, whom God endowed with a moral consciousness.

Such a study must of necessity include history, writes Bell, "the record not merely of man's economic and governmental arrangements and disarrangements but of man's groping attempts to find meaning, his striving to maintain self-respect, his endeavor to live with other men in mutual joy despite continual disillusionments, his frequent near despairs, his grounds for hope." History, as Bell defines it, is that study by which one comes to see in the past an enduring order and purpose teleologically defined by the Eternal. One studies "man's failures," Bell tells us, to gain "humility and compassion." One considers "man's occasional successes" to know "the price which must be paid to become and remain adequately a husband or a wife, a parent, a friend, a lover, a citizen, a human being." History, as Bell understands it and would have us understand it, is nothing less than the past realized in the present, the present realized in the past. It is not, as the New Historicists would make of it, a bolus upon which to impose an ideological methodology. It is, on the contrary, an integral relationship of parts to a whole through which, and in which, the Logos is made manifest.

The study of created man must go beyond pure history, however. To be complete, says Bell, this study must engage the philosophers. Furthermore, it should extend to the best of imaginative literature, particularly vatic poetry, which Richard Weaver called the "surest antidote to the vices of sentimentality and brutality." Moreover, the study of man qua man ought to entail a sincere examination of music, dance, sculpture, painting, and theater; from these strivings to achieve a significant creativeness one gains indispensable insights into the human predicament. And, yes, the study of man, rightly conceived, must take into account his religion, for man is by nature, and by divine plan, a religious being whose essential dignity depends finally upon his Maker.

In describing the formation of an elite to guide the crowd, Bell echoed other visionaries in the literary party of order. Babbitt, for one, called for an "aristocracy of character and intelligence...to take the place of an aristocracy of birth, and to counteract the tendency toward an aristocracy of money." In a letter to Paul Elmer More, Eliot expressed his hope that a "new type of intellectual" would come into being, one "combining the intellectual and the devotional." Neither the "purely intellectual Christian" nor the "purely emotional Christian" will suffice, Eliot said, to combat the humanitarianism of a spiritually regressive age like the present. This new kind of intellectual must, Eliot insisted, have "hold of the tip of the tail of something quite real, more real than morals or than sweetness and light and culture." This new being and his fellow aristocrats must, according to the literary party of order, be as medieval-minded as they are modern. They must stand in stark contrast to the squabbling demagogue who climbs to power on the backs of the crowd whom he flatters. They must lead, as More put it, "by imposing their authority and experience on the impulsive emotions of the multitude."

Since Crowd Culture first appeared in print, America has changed in many ways for the better. The civil rights movement, for example, certainly improved the moral integrity of the country. Yet in many more ways America has changed for the worse. The same decade that gave rise to the Civil Rights Act spawned a selfish individualism, which made possible *Roe v. Wade*. This decade also gave birth to numerous breeds of unprecedented radicalism, among which hedonism, militant feminism, multiculturalism, and moral relativism figure prominently. The effects of the sixties have now become the causes for still more radicalism. Over the past fifty years, and especially since the sixties, America has changed significantly in the degree to which it has lost its way. More than ever, the crowd apes the life-distorting images that abound on the

ubiquitous television and upon the alluring cinema screen, images projected, in large part, by those who would exploit the gullibility of the common man and woman.

Were he alive in our time, how would Bell react, one might ask, to the sordid television talk show that celebrates abnormality or to the banal evening sitcom of our new millennium that panders to the basest sense of humor, or to the latest Hollywood productions that conjoin sex with sentimentality for the lachrymose? In all likelihood, he would respond as he did in his autobiographical book *Beyond Agnosticism*: "I find it hard, even yet, to embrace the way of the Virgin, but I was not very old before I knew that Astarte can be very stale." Today, the media continue to bombard us with salacious images-many of them violent-promoting the grand illusion that those who have amassed money and been graced with pretty faces are having sex practically all the time, in practically any place. What Bell said at the start of the last century is still true at the start of this one: "We are so na<vely delighted in having discovered that the Eternal made us men and women that we sometimes seem to be forgetting that He made us anything else."

Of course the media are not entirely to blame for the crowd's moral stupor. The crowd is finally responsible for itself, and ultimately accountable to God. Yet the signs of the time indicate that its appetite for the fleeting and momentary continues to grow ever more voracious as the new millennium dawns. What once seemed plenty, even to Bell's generation, now fails to satisfy. Today, for instance, the average family home contains more bedrooms and notably larger closets than the average home constructed fifty years ago, even though today's average family produces, by choice, fewer children than it did back then. While homes increase in size and boast more amenities, America itself grows seemingly smaller as communities further lose their autonomy, and as once diverse regions melt into a monotonous sameness.

This sameness organizes itself around an ideology that compels both husband and wife to work outside the home to amass products which Americans are convinced they must have to be happy and au courant. As a result, millions of children now spend their preschool years, if not their infancies, in institutional daycare centers, while their parents do exactly as they are disposed by the social engineers of modern liberalism. These engineers have been trying to reinvent society for the last century and a half. "Up until now philosophers have only interpreted the world," wrote their intellectual father, Karl Marx. "The point now is to change it."

A final few words ought to be devoted to changes in education. America's schools are not the same as they were when Bell denounced them, and the pedagogical facts and figures that were relevant at the time when Bell adduced them to bolster his claims about the demise of learning are, one must admit, dated and of little use to us today. Moreover, one has to admit that opportunities for learning are greater with the erection of more colleges and with the opening of their doors to those who might not have been admitted in times past. Furthermore, one would have to be obstinate not to acknowledge, with some obvious qualifications, the benefit of greater access to information via the internet. Still, one might ask if education is any better now than in Bell's day. If one agrees with Bell that education must have a coherent framework and something timeless at its center, one is obliged to say no.

Here is not the place to rehearse all the problems that plague American education. But let us say just a word or two about the decay of reading. The educrat typically claims that more students are able to read today than in decades past, and he bases this claim on the fact that more high school students go on to college now than ever before. This claim has some validity-but very little. More students may be reading, but, owing to a lack of classroom rigor and proper instruction, they are not reading well. Evidence shows, and any reasonable teacher knows, that for high school and college students the level of reading comprehension is, on the average, lower now than when Bell

taught school. Nor are students reading the right things. Rarely are they encouraged to engage the great books of the Western world. Instead, they are presented with demotic novels and plays that validate lifestyle choices.

What is more, students are also presented with the idea that one kind of experience is as valuable as another when it comes to reading. The experiential theorists who cultivate this idea insist that a student better "relates" to a poem or piece of fiction when he brings to it his own personal experience (no matter how provincial). They may be right, but they fail to see that there is more to reading books than relating to them on a personal level. One must wonder how the theorist could continue to promote this superficial kind of reading in the face of rampant cultural ignorance, when students grow ever less conversant with the seminal works that shaped the minds of those who founded their country. Are the theorists trying to occlude these works? What students ought to be bringing to literature are experiences of a literary kind. Students cannot fully appreciate a classic like *Heart of Darkness*, for example, unless they have some prior experience with Dante, whom Conrad invokes. Students become experienced readers, and good citizens to boot, by continually expanding their context for reading through encounters with texts that are morally and culturally significant.

If in the past five decades America's cultural and educational picture has changed in many ways for the worse, so has its religious life. Although churches have not entirely suppressed the proclamation of God's wisdom, they have nevertheless exiled just about all their prophets, or sequestered them in remote monasteries, or insisted that they make their message more pleasingly palatable for the crowd. One can certainly see why. Prophets have always been a disturbing bunch. They are forever pointing out ecclesiastical inconsistency and condemning deference to the world. They exact something from the laity instead of validating its way of life. Pride, ambition, the love of money, the lust for power—these they renounce and denounce with a disconcerting vigor. This has been the case from the dawn of Christendom, when the Twelve Apostles, whom most thought to be raging lunatics, went about turning the world on its head and unsettling the morally indifferent and the spiritually complacent. Men like Loyola and Luther and Wesley, in later times, were no more conducive to the status quo. The price that churches are paying today for preferring popularity to prophecy is amounting, as Bell predicted it would, to their becoming laughable as well as powerless.

Many things have changed since Bell took his stand against the follies of the last century. Yet his voice, as expressed in the following pages, can still resonate within contemporary America. More than ever its culture, now a crowd culture worshipping cellular gadgets and floating adrift in one virtual reality after another, needs to be grounded in genuine reality; it needs to be reoriented and humanized, and its citizens need to be dignified. Its schools desperately need rescuing from the ideologues who continue to alienate students from their intellectual heritage. Now more than ever, its faithful need to hear substantive sermons on those changeless truths concerning the creaturehood of mankind.

Crowd Culture reminds us that all this can be achieved, but only when those who share a common metaphysical dream "raise up rebels willing to pay the price which rebels must expect to pay." Only with the guidance of such a democratic elite can America hope to regain its sanity. Only under the leadership of those who have drunk deeply from the springs of our classical and Christian heritage can citizens come to know the real meaning of life, liberty, and justice for all. Only from example can Americans learn that, to avoid moral torpor, they must "seek to participate in the richness of tradition newly grasped, tradition reinterpreted." If America persists in its aimless

course, its democracy can only end in catastrophe. Against those who now lead the way, the rebel must stand resolute. This is his "reasonable service," writes Bell, his "religious duty."

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