



# “Is Anything True? Is Anything Lovely?” Educating Heart and Mind in a Culture of Relativism

By Ken Myers

In our time, many individuals and institutions are understandably alarmed about the state of our culture, about the spiritual and social dead-end to which modernity seems to have guided us. Countless books, blogs, conferences, and sermons take aim at this or that social disorder, many of them suggesting strategies for turning the tide. But I am concerned that many of these pundits and activists are addressing symptoms, not causes. They tend to identify the most superficial and outrageous outbreaks of idolatry or insanity, those dramatic and often sensational offenses that are a fund-raiser’s dream.

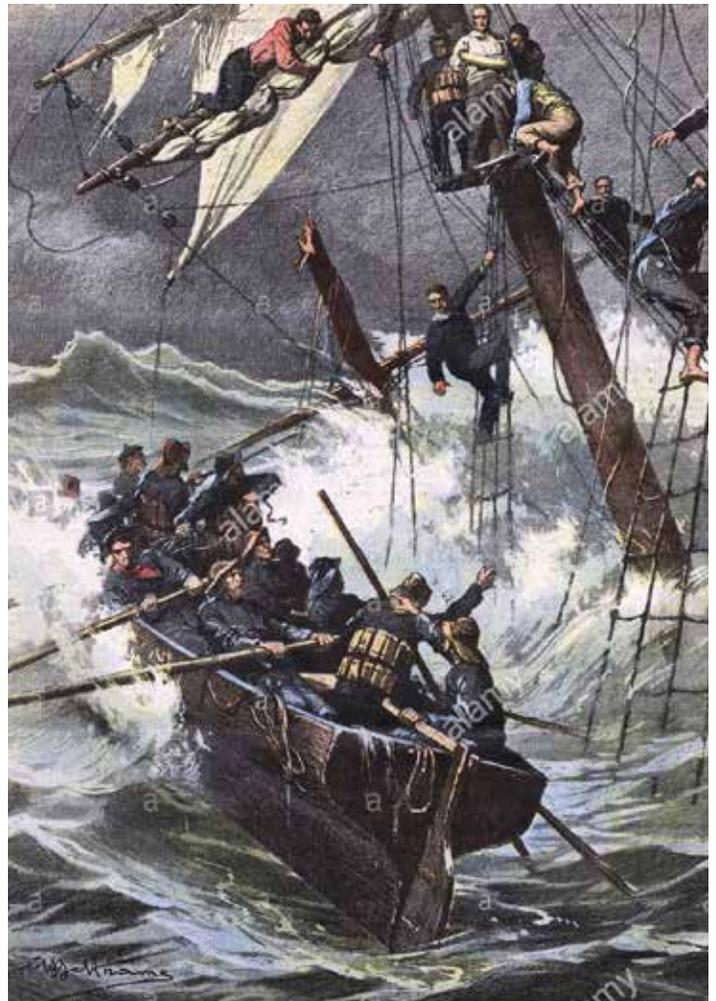
These targets of protest certainly deserve criticism and censure, but they are, I submit, manifestations of deeper disorientations that afflict our culture. And unless Christians understand the radical nature of the confusions that got us here, our defensive reactions may well end up adding momentum to the runaway train that is the post-Christian West.

In 2004 I spent some time in Turkey and Greece with a group of travelers that included Frederica Mathews-Green and her husband Gary, who are both devout members of the Orthodox church. They used to be Episcopalians; Gary was an Episcopal priest. One day while we were on a bus between sites, Frederica told me the story of their conversion to Orthodoxy. Years ago, while they were watching the Episcopal church floundering in its troubled waters, Gary repeatedly suggested to Frederica that maybe they needed to find a more hospitable church home. But Frederica consistently said that they should stay. “Even the *Titanic* needed chaplains,” she would say. Of the two of them, Frederica is certainly the more outspoken and insistent, so Gary would drop his suggestion. But one day, after Frederica had again urged her husband to stay and care for his mortally threatened parish, Gary spoke up and

said, “No, what they needed on the *Titanic* were lifeboats.” Shortly thereafter, they converted to Orthodoxy.

*Classical Christian schools are lifeboats.*

While some Christian institutions are providing spiritual comfort to a drowning culture and some are foolishly aiding and abetting the floods, Classical Christian schools are in a unique position to sustain a rescue and recovery operation. And they are doing this by reorienting the hearts and the minds of thousands of young saints. They offer a





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framework and a set of practices that equip young people to know themselves, Creation, and their Creator properly.

Our cultural crisis is a function of faulty assumptions about the nature of things and about how to properly know the nature of things. That is to say, we are confused about being and about knowing. We are confused about the kind of creatures we are and the kind of world we live in and the kind of Being who made and sustains all things. In the rescue mission of classical schooling, educators have embraced a deliberately counter-cultural approach to teaching — to the passing on of knowledge and of disciplines of knowing. Conventional forms of modern education are all about doing. They focus on techniques that will promote success in doing all sorts of things, without examining the ends that should guide our doing. Classical Christian schools, meanwhile, have adopted an approach that rightly addresses the more fundamental and more decisive questions of being and knowing. What kinds of creatures are we? What kind of world do we live in? What is the way of a well-lived life? An educational strategy that tries to prepare students for action but bypasses the prior concerns of the setting and the ends of our actions has led and will lead to our undoing.

In his book, *The Risk of Education*, Luigi Giussani says that “to educate means to help the human soul enter into the totality of the real.” Here, Giussani echoes a number of other thinkers who have insisted that education isn’t just about communicating facts, or even about conveying the truth, but about connecting students to reality. For example, in his wonderful book *The Logic of the Heart*, James Peters points out that “in the Augustinian tradition, the proper function of reason is not merely to make true judgments concerning a world of neutral, nonmoral facts, but to enable the rational individual to make proper contact with reality, a state of being that requires not only ‘true belief,’ but the transformation of the will and affections needed to put us in touch with — to align us fully with — reality. . . The perfection of reason requires our being transformed into the kind of persons we are designed to be — persons

who are able not only to describe but also to affirm and become united with the God of love.”

The only way we can make proper contact with the reality of Creation is by being oriented by love, by union with the God of love. But this uniting isn’t some irrational spiritual experience, which we then set aside when we apply ourselves to the demands of knowing. If we’re to be aligned with reality we have to be aligned with the Logos by whom all things were made and in whom all things hold together. Christ is the aligner of all reality, so we have to be aligned with Christ — the Logos who is Love — to make proper contact with reality, to enter into the totality of the real, to acknowledge and respond properly to what is true, what is good, and what is beautiful.

For much of the modern era, many Christians have unfortunately behaved as if they could know the world in a neutral, mechanical way. They might affirm that knowing Jesus required the proper orientating of our hearts, but only heads were involved in knowing the world. And the supposed division between head and heart corresponds to other divisions: facts and values, body and spirit, secular and sacred, public and private, politics and religion. This alleged schism in reality is profoundly mistaken about both being and knowing. It is a dismembering that affects our culture at all levels, in all institutions, in all families and personal lives.

Following the logic of this radical dualism, most of our public educational institutions view education as a form of technical training, not the shaping of the soul to participate in reality, and observers as diverse as Wendell Berry and Tom Wolfe have commented on how the mechanisms of modern education lead to a mechanistic view of human life, devoid of transcendent meaning.

The late literary critic Marion Montgomery once observed that education is *the preparing of the mind for the accumulated and accumulating knowledge of the truth of things*. Preparing of the mind requires the training of all the intellectual capacities: reasoning abilities, the imagination, even the affections: all of the components of how we know and know about the world are prepared



in students so that they can receive an inheritance: “the accumulated and accumulating knowledge of the truth of things.” Knowledge is an inheritance, not an individualistic possession. We learn to know the world — as we learn to know God and ourselves — in community. And we have to be prepared for that knowledge. We are prepared, first of all, by receiving language. Montgomery has said that, understood correctly, the proper vocation of schools and their teachers is “the stewardship of the mind through words.”

Language enables us to acquire the knowledge of the truth of things. There is a reality that is there to be affirmed, and each of us has a place within that reality. Education is the lifelong project of recognizing the contours of reality, discovering how our lives mesh with it, and learning as well the right words to use to name the world and its ways.

I think that it was a form of that strict separation of fact from value — of head from heart — that was one of the motivations behind C. S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man*.

Lewis had a keen eye and little sympathy for modern superstitions — superstitions such as the idea that education can be value-free. While most of our contemporaries are likely to dismiss all premodern convictions as superstitions, Lewis saw that no era was more mired in irrational and unexamined hogwash than the modern era. And it’s remarkable how often Lewis identifies distinctively modern assumptions as the most notable obstacles to belief in the teachings of Christianity.

The subtitle to C. S. Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man* begins with the phrase “Reflections on education . . .” It is a small book about many big things: science, natural law, ethics, but foremost it is a book about education and about the necessarily moral and spiritual center of education. Late in the book, Lewis refers to the role that education has had in equipping people for the great task of life, of discerning (in Lewis’s terms) “how to conform the soul to reality.” There’s a real world out there, a world of practical challenges and moral meaning, a world with spiritual consequences and recognizable patterns of wisdom and folly. And the project of each human being, the pilgrimage that engages

all of us, the end for which we were given life, is to grow in discernment about reality, to understand it aright, both in its large patterns and in its specificity, and then, to find our place within it. The task for which education should begin to prepare us is that of rightly perceiving the shape of reality, and then rightly discerning the task established for us within its drama.

There is an objectivity to that reality, and hence receiving an education is not simply acquiring skills of reasoning and analysis; it also involves receiving an inheritance of knowledge, an accumulating account of “the truth of things.” Each generation of teachers says to the new generation of students: “*This* is the way things are, to the best of our understanding.”

Education is objective, because reality is ordered. But there is a necessary subjectivity in education as well. Not only must our minds be trained in what Marion Montgomery calls virtuous habits of thought, but our hearts also need to be properly trained so that we will come to *love* the good, true, and beautiful.

In his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul writes “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Our minds and affections are to be aligned by various excellences, and human nature is such that we need to learn, we need to be taught how to recognize what is just and pure and commendable. The need for teaching is implied in the very next verse, when the apostle writes, “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

St. Paul’s teaching insists that some things are *intrinsically* lovely, honorable, excellent, and so forth. This fact has profound implications for how we conceive of education. Near the beginning of *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis observes that “Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could either be congruous or incongruous to it — believed, in fact, that objects did



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not merely receive, but could merit, our approval or disapproval, our reverence, or our contempt." Honorable things should be honored; lovely things should be loved.

Given the *objective* character of reality, education was properly concerned with shaping the young to have the proper *subjective* response to it. Lewis summarizes the premodern view of education as more about training the emotions or affections than about training analytic reason: "St. Augustine defines virtue as *ordo amoris*, the ordinate condition of the affections in which every object is accorded that kind and degree of love which is appropriate to it. Aristotle says that the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought... Plato before him had said the same. The little human animal will not at first have the right responses. It must be trained to feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which really are pleasant, likable, disgusting, and hateful."

Part of Lewis's project is to argue against the separation of head from heart. In the first chapter, he writes: "Because our approvals and disapprovals are thus recognitions of objective value or responses to an objective order, therefore emotional states can be in harmony with reason (when we feel liking for what ought to be approved) or out of harmony with reason (when we perceive that liking is due but cannot feel it). No emotion is, in itself, a judgment; in that sense all emotions and sentiments are alogical. But they can be reasonable or unreasonable as they conform to Reason or fail to conform. The heart never takes the place of the head; but it can, and should, obey it."

And when Lewis speaks here of Reason, he is speaking of more than a rational perception of facts or truths: he is including a sense of duty or obligation; Reason for Lewis implies what used to be called Practical Reason, concern with what we ought to do. Reason is rightly concerned with *ought* questions as well as *is* questions; *ought* questions are not optional "subjective" reflections pursued after Reason has finished its work. The truth of things—to use Marion Montgomery's phrase—is as much about how we ought to live as it is about the sorts of things

usually labeled as "facts," things that are measurable and quantifiable.

*Leisure, the Basis of Culture* by the German philosopher Josef Pieper can help us see what it means that "to educate means to help the human soul enter into the totality of the real." Pieper distinguishes between education and training, that is, between being cultivated for knowing and being, and being prepared only for doing. "A functionary is trained," Pieper writes. "Training is defined as being concerned with some one side or aspect of man, with regard to some special subjects." Training, in other words, is specialized and targeted to a narrow task. "Education," on the other hand, "concerns the whole man; an educated man is a man with a point of view from which he takes in the whole world. Education concerns the whole man, man *capax universi*, capable of grasping the totality of existing things."

Christian Classical education is much more than a set of techniques for achieving the same ends that conventional schooling seeks. It is a recovery of an understanding of human being and human knowing that had been sustained by the Church for centuries, but has gradually been lost in modern culture, sadly, by Christians as well as by unbelievers. And this is why I think these schools are one of the most hopeful phenomena in contemporary culture. Christian Classical schools impart much more than information and skill sets; they strive to convey a posture fitting for the kinds of creatures we are, not the kind of beings modern culture assumes us to be: cosmic accidents trying to acquire godlike power to invent reality on our own terms.

That creaturely posture requires that we attend — as did wise Solomon — to the way the world really is. In leisure, properly understood, we find a foundation for education as well as the basis of culture. Leisure, Pieper writes, "is a receptive attitude of mind, a contemplative attitude, and it is not only the occasion but also the capacity for steeping oneself in the whole of creation."

For Pieper, leisure is not idleness or relaxation or recreation. It is a quiet openness to reality. He writes



that “Leisure is only possible when a man is at one with himself, when he acquiesces in his own being.” Leisure requires an internal unity and peace, an absence of division and restlessness. I’m reminded of the opening verses in the epistle of James, in which we’re told: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” Wisdom will not be given to such a person who is not at one with himself. And leisure, as Pieper defines it, that receptive attitude of mind rendering us capable of being open to all of reality — is also unavailable to such a tempestuous soul.

That image in James — of the doubter, the divided, restless man — invites us to remember both Jesus’ rebuking of the waves — “Be Still” — and the command in Psalm 46: “Be still and know that I am God.” Later in his book, Pieper describes that receptive, contemplative attitude even more deeply:

“Leisure is a form of silence,” Pieper writes, “of that silence which is the prerequisite of the apprehension of reality: only the silent hear and those who do not remain silent do not hear. Silence, as it is used in this context, does not mean ‘dumbness’ or ‘noiselessness’; it means more nearly that the soul’s power to ‘answer’ to the reality of the world is left undisturbed.”

Since many of you know I’ve been quite concerned about how our practices involving music have the capacity to connect us to reality, or to distract us from reality, I want to share a short observation from Pieper from an essay in his book *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation*. (In that book’s title, love and music converge, suggesting that the delight of love and the expression of delight through music are united. Art and contemplation are joined because art is never just the expression of the self, but of the self marveling at the objective beauty and wonders, the loveliness of reality.) The essay is called “Music and

Silence.” In it, Pieper observes: “to the extent that it is more than mere entertainment of intoxicating rhythmic noise, music is alone in creating a particular kind of silence, though by no means soundlessly. . . . It makes a listening silence possible, but a silence that listens to more than simply sound and melody. . . . Far beyond this, music opens up a great, perfectly dimensioned space of silence within which, when things come about happily, a reality can dawn which ranks higher than music.” Music can be a numbing, distracting experience, or it can move us toward contemplation, toward perception of transcendence.

True education must be contemplative; that is, it must convey a posture that is attentive, receptive, wondering, and grateful. It turns out that the preparing of the mind for the truth of things isn’t just a matter of imparting reasoning skills and a set of facts, but the nurturing of a loving, confident, hopeful, and faithful cast of mind. St. Augustine advises us: “Seek not to understand that you may believe, but to believe that you may understand.”

There is a constellation or matrix of disciplines or virtues or blessings in view here: contemplation, silence and solitude, reverence and receptivity and recollection. I think of these qualities as the ecosystem of gratitude and wisdom. In acquiring the capacities to align ourselves with reality more fully, we are prepared for the gift of wisdom, and we are compelled to be grateful for that and all other gifts. I’ve come to think that educators have more to learn about the deepest meaning of their work from mystics than from management consultants.

Now, teachers: I realize that this sounds at least a million miles away from the realities of your classrooms. But I think that your work of rescue and recovery of a lost way of understanding how we understand would be greatly assisted by some reflection and discussion of works of people who have reflected deeply on how we can learn the practice of being still. Eugene Peterson, A.W. Tozer, Dallas Willard, and Don Whitney, to mention a few, and the list is a long one: there are lots of people who have written about prayer, about attentiveness, about art and creativity who have reflected on how we can wrestle with restlessness. For



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most of us, it often feels like our whole life is set on vibrate, but there are practices and disciplines that can serve to calm the tempests. And my claim is that this vocabulary of contemplation and silence is not just relevant to our prayer lives, but is integral to the recovery of interior life more generally, with profound consequences for understanding the aims and methods of education.

To close by returning to where I started, let me offer one more take on our modern confusion about the nature of Creation and about our proper posture toward Creation and its Maker. The Canadian philosopher George Parkin Grant once wrote an essay reflecting on a characteristic North American trait which he described as an omnipresent practicality “which trusts in technology to create the rationalised kingdom of man.” During his lifetime—he died in 1988—Grant argued that the Puritan impulse to build here a City of God was in time secularized and pragmatized to become a kingdom of man, built on the foundation, not of prophets and apostles, but of inventors and engineers. Ben Franklin’s practical, can-do optimism has unfortunately been more influential in shaping our national life than has Cotton Mather’s or Jonathan Edwards’s heavenly-mindedness. Later in that same essay, Grant suggested that Americans lacked what he called the tradition of contemplation. He didn’t mean that we didn’t have monks or mystics that thought deeply, but that we lacked the ability to see the world as something other than just a lot of raw material with which we could do something. We lack the recognition that our first response to the world should be that of wonder and marveling, of being amazed and astonished by it (and I would add, grateful for it). And that such a posture of wonder and awe is the only proper place to begin to ask what we *should* do in the world.

Lacking the tradition of contemplation, we are good at asking *how* questions but not *why* questions, or even the essential *what* questions: What is Man? What is Truth? What is Good? What is Lovely? We insist that good questions must have quantifiable and practical answers. Questions that bring us to the point of speechless wonder,

of awareness of deeper mysteries, are not very popular in American culture. And that is part of why we are so confused. We arrogantly believe that confusion can be prevented if we could solve all the mysteries, and thereby control all things, remaking the world to suit our desires. Conventional education promotes the illusion of control, even as it cuts children off from wonder.

By contrast, the well-educated person — open to reality, receptive to truth, delighted by what is lovely — knows that mysteries properly understood are occasions for humble praise and gratitude, for being still and knowing that God is God.

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