

Presbyterian Follies

Last year, a special committee of the Presbyterian Church called for radical change in traditional Christian attitudes toward sexual behavior. In the *New Republic* (Dec. 2, 1991), Camille Paglia, author of *Sexual Personae* (1990), found in the committee's report only a new spirit of puritanism.

Keeping Body and Soul Together demonstrates the chaos and intellectual ineptitude in the fashionable liberal discourse on sex that now fills the media and the academic and political worlds. All human problems are blamed on an unjust social system, a 'patriarchy' of gigantic and demonized dimensions, blanketing history like a river of molasses

The report assails the 'influential tradition of radical asceticism' in 'Western Christianity' that expresses 'body-alienation,' 'fear of sex and, in particular, of women.' It assumes that eremites and monks were not contemplatives but killjoys, neurotics, and misogynists, scowling while the rest of the world caroused, footloose and fancy free. The report complains of 'our cultural captivity to a patriarchal model of sexuality and its

ethic of sexual control,' as if sexual rules and taboos were not prevalent in every culture

The committee members seem to have read nothing in their lives but feminist tracts churned out since 1969. Kate Millett and Carolyn Heilbrun, those intellectual giants, are approvingly quoted. Alice Walker is pushed forward to symbolize modern literature. There is no reference to any major writer in history except Dante, whose theory of love is superficially summarized

But there is something deeper at work in the report than contemporary platitudes and ignorance of world history and culture. It is the revival of the old Protestant ethic, masquerading in hip new clothes. Like so much current feminist ideology, this supposedly liberal statement on sexuality represents not progressive thinking but a throwback to pre-'60s conventionalism: rigid, narrow, and puritanical. It is a new tyranny of the group, pretending to speak for individuals while it crushes them. Humanitarian jargon-phrases are used to pin us in pious attitudes of compulsory brotherhood.

sity—the claim to free exercise protection for certain actions must be denied.” But the great danger today, he claims, “is not the threat that religion poses to public life, but the threat that the state, presuming to embody public life, poses to religion.” And that threat is not to religion alone. “When

the American people can no longer publicly express their obligations to the Creator, it is to be feared that they will no longer acknowledge their obligations to one another—nor to the Constitution in which the obligations of freedom are enshrined.”

A Place for Metaphysics

“Metaphysics in Education after Hutchins and Dewey” by René Vincente Arcilla, in *Teachers College Record* (Winter 1991), Teachers College, Columbia Univ., 525 W. 120th St., Box 103, New York, N.Y. 10027.

“How can we consider man's destiny unless we ask what he is? How can we talk about preparing men for life unless we ask what the end of life may be? At the base of education, as at the base of every human activity, lies metaphysics.” So insisted Robert M. Hutchins (1899–1977), the long-time president of the University of Chicago and a leading advocate of the “Great Books” approach to higher education. Phi-

losopher and educational theorist John Dewey (1859–1952) strongly disagreed—and his argument largely carried the day. Yet the Hutchins–Dewey debate of the 1930s still reverberates today, with Allan Bloom and others taking up Hutchins's position, and Richard Rorty and others upholding Dewey's. Arcilla, a professor of philosophy and education at Columbia University's Teachers College, finds wis-

dom on both sides.

Metaphysics, the study of first principles, is "the highest science," Hutchins maintained, and therefore it should pervade the college curriculum. The social and natural sciences should be taught as the subordinate sciences that they are. To the pragmatist Dewey, however, metaphysics was not a genuine science. Metaphysical ideas, by themselves, did not constitute knowledge in his eyes; their only use was in forming theoretical hypotheses to explain empirical facts. Shaping education according to perceived metaphysical truths, Dewey argued, would mean giving it an authoritarian cast. As he saw it, Arcilla explains, metaphysics "prevents us in principle from investigating whether empirical and practical facts may to some degree also determine, and help us criticize, the meta-

physical truths we hold. Yet we need to criticize these truths in this way in order to cultivate a democratic and liberal society." Aristotelian metaphysics, after all, had countenanced slavery.

In the field of education, Dewey's position is now "common sense," Arcilla says. Yet that ought not to mean that ultimate questions about the nature and purpose of human life should go unasked. "Hutchins may have been wrong to believe that we possess, or could possess, metaphysical truths," but he may well have been right that "the questions that have spurred the quest for such truths" should be taken up. Just because its results are "unscientific," Arcilla says, does not mean that metaphysical speculation must be "in conflict with our scientific interests in education, or . . . that it has no pragmatic value at all."

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

Nature's Starring Role

"Starry Messengers: Supernovas, Comets and Sunspots heralded the Scientific Revolution" by Frederic J. Baumgartner, in *The Sciences* (Jan.-Feb. 1992), The New York Academy of Sciences, 2 East 63rd St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

The 17th-century scientific revolution that overturned the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic view of the universe is usually credited to such giants as Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo, and to the invention of the telescope. Baumgartner, an historian at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, points out another major contributor: nature itself.

When Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) proposed in *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (1543) that the planets, including Earth, revolved around the sun, his arguments made not a dent in the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic orthodoxy. The orthodoxy held that Earth was at the center of the universe and that the world beyond the moon's orbit was virtually unchanging. In Copernicus's time, astronomers had found no heavenly evidence that seriously disrupted the Ptolemaic cosmology.

In 1572, however, a new point of light

appeared in the sky and remained there for more than a year. It was what modern astronomers call a supernova, a massive explosion of a dying star. "To astronomers of the day," notes Baumgartner, "the appearance of a new star in the heavens was simply impossible."

Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe's discovery of that "impossible" star was just the beginning. Five years later, a great comet blazed across the sky where it was not supposed to be, far beyond the orbit of the moon, and it dealt an even stronger blow to the traditional wisdom. Nor was that the end of what was an extraordinary succession of dramatic celestial phenomena. Over a 70-year period that began with Brahe's first excited discovery, Europeans witnessed two of only three supernovas ever recorded in Europe, two of the greatest comets ever seen, unusually high sunspot activity, two total eclipses of the sun,