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A genuinely transgressive act

On the dedication of Christ Chapel at Hillsdale College.

Regular readers of this column know that we are often engaged in a species of cultural pathology. We regularly chronicle absurdities, malignancies, outrages, and insanities throughout the world of culture: in museums and the art world, theater and “performance art,” the media, and above all in the world of academia. Every now and then, it is true, we have espied and celebrated a glimmer of hope, a sliver of good news from the ramparts of ridiculousness. Despite the occasional rosy bulletin, however, our Notes & Comments, especially when dilating on academia, have tended more towards the denunciatory and satirical than the celebratory. Think Cicero on Catiline or on Mark Antony, Jonathan Swift or Evelyn Waugh on anything that attracted their ire.

Anyone who casts his eye across the landscape of academia today will understand why this is the case. The unedifying truth is that our culture, and the petri dish that harbors it—our educational establishment—is in thrall to debilitating toxins. Alas,

although it is possible to write amusingly when exposing the malignant absurdities that compose this drama of decline, there is nothing amusing about the reality thus chronicled.

It is therefore a rare pleasure to be able to write in full-throated commendation of a signal event at an important academic institution. Last month, Hillsdale College marked its 175th anniversary by dedicating Christ Chapel, a magnificent new building designed by the distinguished ecclesiastical architect Duncan Stroik, a professor of architecture at Notre Dame. The chastely sumptuous, classically inflected structure occupies a prominent spot on the college's central quad. It is, the college reports, the largest classical chapel built in America in seventy years. It must also be the most beautiful.

Which brings us to the first item to note: the cheek—the audacity—of a liberal arts college *circa* 2019 choosing to build and give such prominence to an explicitly Christian chapel. It even features a cross on the roof above its main entrance. Talk about transgressive! In a brochure about the chapel, we read that Hillsdale College since its founding “has been dedicated to the immemorial teachings and practices of the Christian faith. It is dedicated as well to high learning, moral formation, and the perpetuation of civil and religious liberty.” Most older colleges and universities were founded to promulgate such “immemorial teachings and practices.” How many would dream of acknowledging them today? Stone by stone they have dismantled that foundation. New-age nostrums such as radical environmentalism, racial

grievance-mongering, or sex-in-the-head gender mania are pursued with a fervor that seems almost religious in its intensity, but they offer sparse support for the teetering edifice they have excavated.

Most of our readers will know something about Hillsdale College. Located in Hillsdale, Michigan, it was founded in 1844 by abolitionists. Frederick Douglass once spoke there. The college unashamedly puts the American Founders and traditional humanistic education at the center of its curriculum. Hillsdale has, since its founding, accepted students regardless of race, sex, or religion. Compare that record to the record of any college in the Ivy League or the gold coast of super-expensive Ivy-enviers (Heather Mac Donald has more to say about Harvard's record later in the issue).

What Hillsdale does not accept is government money. It takes not a dime from the federal or state government. This means that it has also largely escaped the smothering intervention of government regulation. It has no deans of diversity, for example, or Title IX coordinators. Its dorms are segregated by sex—and, yes, there are only two sexes acknowledged. In his twenty years at the helm of Hillsdale, Larry Arnn—a widely recognized scholar of Winston Churchill—has done an enormous amount to raise the academic standards, and the financial wherewithal, of the small college (current enrollment is about 1,500). He has also greatly expanded its influence. The college is an entrepreneurial powerhouse with burgeoning initiatives across the country. Its newsletter, *Imprimis*, goes *gratis* to more than four million readers and serves as an effective ambassador for the college's core ideas.

In his remarks at the dedication, President Arnn noted that the difficult question is not why Hillsdale chose to build Christ Chapel. Rather, it is why other colleges have declined to do likewise. It is not for lack of money or precedent. No, it is because most other colleges have “turned away from things that are beautiful, which also means a turning away from things that are true and things that are good.”

When you walk into Christ Chapel, you catch your breath in response to the soaring grandeur of the space. Its stateliness lifts the spirit and puts you, Arnn noted, in mind of “ultimate things.” That is by design, and it is a testimony to Stroik’s skill that the hundreds of people who crowded into Christ Chapel to witness its dedication instantly understood, and experienced, what Arnn was talking about.

But the key point is that the architect is not just a manipulator of psychological feelings. He is also a conduit of realities that transcend the quotidian borders of our workaday lives. You do not hear much about beauty or its inextricable relation to the true and the good on most college campuses these days. Even to utter the words without the armor of scare quotes would be to seem quaint or naïve at best, compromised by affiliation with a putatively oppressive heritage at worst.

But Arnn is right: when we give up on ultimate realities, we lose the foundation for more proximate loyalties. Why should we strive for the good? What is the foundation of human dignity? What is the justification for freedom? When we let go of ultimate realities we rob ourselves of the most compelling answers to such questions.

This was one of the main burdens of Justice Clarence Thomas's remarks at the dedication of Christ Chapel. Justice Thomas, too, resorted to a vocabulary that is seldom heard on college campuses today. The chapel's commodious beauty, he noted, highlights the "transcendence, the sovereignty, and the grace of God." He went on to speak about the spiritual resources of stillness. The clarifying quiet of sacred buildings is an important reason we busy mortals seek them out. The justice then spoke a bit about his own spiritual journey. Raised Catholic, he spent four years in seminary before turning away from the Church in disillusionment. It was not until the 1980s, when he was working for the Reagan administration, that he returned. His own experiences made him appreciate the importance of Hillsdale's decision. "Christ Chapel," he said, "reflects the college's conviction that a vibrant intellectual environment and a strong democratic society are fostered, not hindered, by a recognition of the divine." The same may be said about religious tolerance: the right of others to worship as they see fit is fostered, not hindered, by our acknowledgment of our culture's Judeo-Christian roots.

You won't hear these sentiments bruited about on many college campuses today. They are not, however, novel ideas. Most of the Founders would have agreed with them. To this point, Thomas quoted

John Adams's address to the Massachusetts militia in 1798: "our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Thomas underscored the critical point, one that is missing from most lamentations about the failures of the educational establishment. "The preservation of liberty," he said in his peroration, "is not guaranteed. Without the guardrails supplied by religious conviction, popular sovereignty can devolve into mob rule, unmoored from any conception of objective truth."

The same might be said of lamentations about the state of our culture generally. The "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" that Matthew Arnold discerned as the sea of faith ebbed into darkness around him has become a deafening thunder. The decline in educational standards and liberal learning, the attrition of manners and civility, the ubiquity of a shockingly degraded and corrupting popular culture: all have their origin in that turning away from ultimate things of which Arnns spoke.

The essential problem is not pragmatic but moral, which means that changes in public policy won't fix things—only a change of heart will. We are living with a crisis of values that amounts in the end to a crisis of faith. There are many sides to this crisis, and a long history. Over a century ago, Gustave Flaubert wrote in a letter that he felt "a wave of relentless Barbarism, rising up from below the ground. . . . Never have affairs of the mind counted for less. Never have hatred for everything that is great, contempt for all that is beautiful, abhorrence for literature been so manifest." What would Flaubert have to say could he but visit a class in "cultural studies" at one of our premier universities today?

The problem is not just around us: it is potentially within us as well. As Evelyn Waugh noted,

barbarism is never finally defeated; given propitious circumstances, men and women who seem quite orderly will commit every conceivable atrocity. The danger does not come merely from habitual hooligans; we are all potential recruits for anarchy. Unremitting effort is needed to keep men living together at peace; there is only a margin of energy left over for experiment, however beneficent. Once the prisons of the mind have been opened, the orgy is on.

In one sense, the barbarism that Flaubert and Waugh descried is a perennial threat. What is new is its celebration as a form of liberation. We live at a moment when intellectuals have traded the pursuit of truth for the sophistry of power politics, when all manner of obscenity is broadcast and championed by those charged with preserving our cultural and intellectual heritage, when the public square has become a pit of snarling vituperation. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle observed that nobody but a blockhead believes that our conduct does not form our character. We are as we act, and we have been acting very badly indeed.

It is a melancholy truth that the conservative response to the onslaught of barbarism has been conspicuously impotent. Part of the reason is that conservatives long ago ceded authority in cultural and intellectual matters to leftists, who in turn have capitulated on every issue to the most radical elements.

But culture is not the whole answer. In one of his essays on humanism, T. S. Eliot observed that when we “boil down Horace, the Elgin Marbles, St. Francis and Goethe” the result will be “pretty thin soup.” That truth was also at the heart of Hillsdale’s dedication of Christ Chapel. As Eliot concluded, “Culture, after all, is not enough, even though nothing is enough without culture.” What else is there? Religion, or at least some acknowledgment that the ultimate source of our moral vocation transcends our mundane interventions. Eliot put it neatly: “Either everything in man can be traced as a development from below, or something must come from above. There is no avoiding that dilemma: you must be either a naturalist or a supernaturalist.”

It says a lot that Eliot’s articulation of this core belief of traditional conservatism should be deeply controverted today, even by many conservatives. The depth of that controversy is perhaps an index of our confusion. Dostoevsky once claimed that if God does not exist then everything is permitted. Considerable ingenuity has gone into proving Dostoevsky wrong. To date, though, the record would seem to support him.

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