

MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



The Necessity of Dogmas in Schooling

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ALL SOCIETIES, in all times, have lived by dogmas. When dogmas are abandoned, the social bonds dissolve—swiftly or slowly; and the “open” society ceases to be a society at all, giving way to a new order. The successor-society may be imposed upon a people from without, or it may arise from within the decadent civil social order which has lost its principles of coherence. But the succeeding domination, whether it be harsh or gentle, supplants the old order precisely because the people of the new order believe in some body of truths, and the people of the failing order do not.

During the liberal era which now has sunk into decay nearly everywhere in the world, this word “dogmas” (or “dogmata”) was a devil-term, conjuring up images of the Holy Office and a pile of faggots. “Dogmas” were held to be irrational, archaic, oppressive. Yet the attempt to sustain a society without dogmata is as vain as the attempt to make bricks without straw.

Actually, the word “dogmata” does not signify ignorant repression. “Dogma” is derived from a Greek root meaning “that which seems good.” A dogma is a settled opinion: a principle, maxim, or tenet firmly established. It is a principle or doctrine received on authority—as opposed to one based on personal (or general short-run) experience or demonstration.

It is not foolish to accept on authority, or dogmatic statement, the commonly-accepted circumference of the earth; it would require a great deal of trouble to work out the earth’s circumference for one’s self, and most people are not capable of making such calculations. If that particular scientific dogma ever is altered, the innovation will be worked by talented mathematicians and physicists and geographers—not through private experience or demonstration. And then the new calculation of the earth’s circumference would itself become a kind of dogma.

Similarly, it is not foolish to accept on authority, or dogmatic statement, certain theological and moral and political dogmas. Life is short, personal experience is limited, and learning through demonstration may be both difficult and dangerous. We cannot all be prophets or philosophers. The theological dogma that God exists cannot be “demonstrated” in the sense that a simple experiment in chemistry may be demonstrated; and while that dogma conceivably may be reinforced by personal experience, the experience without the dogma ordinarily brings only wonder at best. The moral dogma that murder is evil indeed would be sustained by experience and demonstration; but meanwhile there would be slaughter. The political dogma that unchecked power is perilous to everybody

doubtless would be vindicated through great suffering, were we to test it by general submission to a band of squalid oligarchs; but liberation from the resulting servitude would be slow and bloody.

When I was a soldier in a desert camp, some of my barracks-mates determined to get drunk on New Year's Eve. Having no whiskey, they drank denatured alcohol, of which we had plentiful supplies in the camp. They declined to accept the authoritative principle that wood alcohol is unfit for internal consumption: after all, none of them previously had tested that dogma. Some died, others were blinded, the fortunate ones were deathly sick. A society which ignores the principles of its coherence and vitality experiences similar consequences: a society that tries to subsist without dogmata.

Yet nowadays no word seems to frighten schoolteachers more than this word "dogma." "We're not propagandists!" a representative teacher of the social sciences may exclaim indignantly, on hearing the suggestion that they ought to try to impart to their pupils some notions of moral worth and social obligation. Such teachers maintain that their responsibility is merely to "present the facts": children must make up their own minds upon questions of order in the soul and order in the commonwealth. Would you prefer to be the burglar, or the burgled, Johnny? Look at the "facts" and make up your mind; develop your own "value-preferences." One trouble with such a concept of "objectivity" is that, in the short run at least, it may seem distinctly more pleasant to burgle than to be burgled.

Nor is the modern pedagogue's attitude one of moral neutrality merely: a good many teachers at every level consider it their duty to diminish old prejudices in the minds of the rising generation, that "open minds" may flourish. Three decades ago, when I was an instructor at Michigan State University, an official committee of my colleagues developed a scheme for determining whether the University (or College, then) was "achieving its mission." What

was its mission? Why, to liberate the aspiring talents of youth by disabusing young men and women of the old fuddy-duddy opinions which they innocently had imbibed in family, church, local community, and earlier schooling.

To test the efficacy of this noble labor undertaken by the College, a lengthy set of questions was drawn up: this questionnaire was to be answered by all of the entering freshmen, in one year, and to be administered to them again, four years later, when they were about to be graduated. If the students' minds had been opened by the abandonment of dogmas, the College could take a just pride in its emancipating achievement.

The character of this questionnaire may be suggested by two of the inquiries put, sufficiently representative of the openmindedness of the scholars who set about this task of redemption. One question ran, "Do you believe that if you want a thing done well, you must do it yourself?" Another asked, "Do you believe it is wrong for brother and sister to have sexual intercourse?"

If the response to the first question was affirmative, clearly the freshman so stating was caught in the trammels of hoary platitude. Every enlightened professor knows through experience and demonstration that it is much better to have work done by committees. Don't we all recognize how beautifully and successfully academic committees function?

As for the second question, I do not suppose that my colleagues were zealous for incest on principle. Rather, they pleaded for toleration: for those who like that sort of thing, that is the sort of thing they like.

The freshmen submitted to this testing, and in the fullness of time the same young persons, as seniors, responded to the questionnaire all over again. To the hideous chagrin of my colleagues, few of those students had altered their opinions substantially. Alas, they remained sunk in obscurantist attitudes, and the College had failed in its mission!

At an international conference in which I once participated, Monk Gibbon, the Irish writer, remarked that the conference's resolutions were platitudes. Then he added that he had learned something about platitudes in the course of his life: the important thing about platitudes is that they are true. That is why they have become platitudes.

Platitudes are expressions of dogmatic belief. If teachers cannot live with platitudes, they ought to take up some other line of work. For, as Plato tells us, the ends of education are wisdom and virtue. An apprehension of wisdom and virtue must commence with the acceptance of certain dogmata, often platitudinously expressed. Even if one aspires to challenge "conventional wisdom," one first must master that conventional wisdom: otherwise the skeptic's challenge is ignorant bluster.

In our time, there is no danger that the mass of young people will be paralyzed by dull submission to ancient custom, convention, and deference. The motion of our age has been centrifugal, not centripetal; the tendency has been eccentric, not centric. Violence and fraud increase at every level of society: half the marriages end in divorce, and we slaughter myriads of unborn infants; the alienist is busier than a bee, and the cement of society disintegrates. The need is not for emancipating the young from fixed convictions, but rather for reminding them that there are some convictions worth cherishing.

It is not the "center city" school merely that is tormented by brutal and sometimes fatal assaults in its corridors, beatings of teachers, addiction to narcotics, juvenile extortion: the rot spreads inexorably outward to suburbs and rural districts. It is not merely the mass campus of Behemoth State U. that suffers from promiscuity and purposelessness: the same ills afflict famous independent universities and colleges that not many years ago still talked of wisdom and virtue—like Harvard with its motto *Veritas*.

For all that, we still encounter in nearly

every educational establishment oldfangled liberal-era jargon about the holy task of secularizing everything; of instructing the young that "everything is relative," and that everyone must decide for himself, out of his wonderful native powers of rationalism, whether he subject himself to "socially approved attitudes" which (a good many teachers imply) may be nothing better than "bourgeois morality" or regulations devised for the preservation of established interests. Meanwhile the school itself slips into anarchy, and the society outside—well, nobody walks the streets o' nights.

True, now that the weak go to the wall on the school bus, and now that even the most naïve parents begin to perceive that college is an unlikely place for Johnny and Sue to acquire rectitude, a feeble disquiet results in seminars for "values clarification," "value-preference education," and the like. Some organizations make real money out of this pabulum.

Yet "teaching about values" cannot suffice. "Values" are private and feeble reeds. One man's value is charitable work; another man's value is brothel-frequenting. Who can judge which is the preferable value—dogmata lacking? In our Father's house are many mansions, but they are not all on the same floor.

A dogma is not a value-preference. A dogma is a firm conviction, received on authority. No one but an ass would die that his value-preference might endure; while dogmatic belief sustains saints and heroes. In the Nazi concentration camps two classes of prisoners generally kept their sanity and tended to survive: Catholic priests and Communist agents. The dogmas of the Church will steel men and women; so, after their fashion, will the dogmas of the savage god, Ideology. For a value-preference—do you prefer pushpin or poetry?—few persons will adventure much.

I repeat that any society lives by dogmata. For action, private or public, must be founded upon certainties. One thinks of a Sanscrit proverb: "If you forsake a certainty and depend on an uncertainty, you

will lose both the certainty and the uncertainty." Dogmas are formulated certainties, and one does not have to be forever reassessing his petty value-preferences in order to act—if he accepts long-beneficial dogmata. Life is for action, not for perpetual doubt, ambiguity, hesitation.

Against the Sanscrit proverb (or dogma), someone may quote again the sentence of Francis Bacon: "If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties." Well, this may be true, in its fashion, for innovating men of science like Bacon or Einstein, say. But if applied to the circumstances of the average man or woman nowadays, this neat aphorism must work mischief. Practically, if the choice must be made, it is better to believe all things than to doubt all things; certainly the ingenuous man or woman is a pleasanter companion than the sour doubter and carper. If a bridegroom commences by doubting the fidelity of his bride, it is improbable that years of wise reflection will bring him to an opposite opinion: if a woman has the name, she may as well have the game. And if a professor begins by doubting whether history is anything but bunk, will decades of tenure convert him into an Augustine, a Bossuet? Or if a boy is instructed that the decision to steal or not to steal must be calculated according to his own best interest and value-preference—why, will some years of practice as a lawyer secure the money and reputation of his clients? My own value-preference is for wives, professors, and lawyers who do not begin dubiously: for dogmatic wives, professors, lawyers, for the commandments "Thou shalt not commit adultery," "Thou shalt not bear false witness," "Thou shalt not steal." Bacon took bribes. I prefer proverbs to clever paradoxes.

Dogmas grow out of the ineluctable necessity for a core of common belief, in church, in state. Private judgment, unattached to dogmas, is insufficient for the moral order or the social order. As Burke

tells us, "The individual is foolish, but the species is wise." Dogmata are the succinct wisdom of the species. Why not trust to one's experience? Because, as Poor Richard says, "Experience keeps a dear school, yet fools will learn in no other."

Dogmata may be corrupted and may decay to virtual extinction. But when they do, soon they are supplanted by other dogmas—promulgated and enforced, commonly, with more fanatic zeal and greater severity. Then the Savage God lays down his new commandments. Soviet Russia rejects the Christ, Communist China rejects Confucius: promptly, to supply motive for the civil social order if for nothing more, rigorous ideological dogmas are formulated, and conformity to them is exacted with a ferocity which makes the Spanish Inquisition seem the creation of ritualistic liberals. For lack of a transcendent sanction, secular dogma necessarily is harsher far than religious dogma. If you think of dogmas as devilish—why, remember that it is safer to deal with the devil you know than with the devil you don't know.

Similarly, as the rising generation is left ignorant of our civilization's dogmas—or is encouraged to discard them—strange new dogmas rush in to fill the spiritual vacuum. Fraudulent cults, any god but God, enslave many thousands of young Americans want to believe in something not altogether bound up with creature comforts. Hare Krishna, Children of God, the Moon madness—these degrade the intellect and fill airport terminals with mendicants, because for many—and in the long run, for all—life without faith and loyalty is unendurable. The old dogmas evaporated, some will choose Mao, some Simon Magus.

In our educational apparatus dogmatic knowledge has been flouted for some decades: John Dewey and his disciples struck hard blows against it. In the schools, and in American life generally, ethical and cultural consensus have decayed. The vestiges of religious assumptions in public schools have been nearly eradicated by certain decisions of our omniscient Supreme Court

—or by the interpretation placed upon those decisions by school administrators and school boards. Dogmatic instruction, in the larger sense of that phrase, has suffered also from a general loss of the order and integration of learning, from kindergarten through graduate school. The ethos of sociability in these United States is hostile toward the demands of dogma; while both vocationalism and appeasement of the counter-culture folk have left little time for the imparting of truths not invented yesterday.

Yet all successful schooling depends upon the acceptance of necessary dogmas. We teach, or used to teach, in kindergarten the dogma that it is wrong for one child to kick another in the shins—and that if the aggressor persists in his value-preference, punishment will follow. Dogmas are first principles. Without first principles, nothing can be achieved intellectually or morally, even by the most brilliant teachers.

Am I advocating some especial form of “civil religion,” that subject so much discussed in recent years? Not so. I am all against the fallacy, for instance, advanced by people like Theodore Brameld, that we should abandon all old dogmas but should teach dogmatically, instead, “the religion of democracy.” I recognize the difficulties, in this pluralistic society, of teaching in public schools the dogmas of a particular creed: that is one reason why we ought to be dismayed by the diminishing of church-related schools, or by their virtual absorption into the climate of opinion (or of non-opinion) which prevails in the public schools. And yet I believe, with Professor Philip Phenix of Teachers College, Columbia, that the whole curriculum of any school should be suffused with reverence—and that this remains possible in public schools.

Schools were founded so that young people might attain an ethical end through an intellectual means. Even in the most pluristic society, enduring ethical truths can be imparted through a variety of intellectual

disciplines—literature, social studies, even the natural sciences: formal courses in religion and ethics, desirable though they may be, are not indispensable in this undertaking; for without sectarianism the principles of inner and outer order, the dogmata essential to a civilization, still may be woven into the general curriculum.

What I have in mind is best expressed by C. S. Lewis, in *The Abolition of Man*. In his appendix on the Tao, the Way, Lewis describes a “natural law” or body of beliefs, taught both by precept and by more subtle means, which may be found in every culture, because without such there can be no culture. These are ethical dogmata, if you will, expressed somewhat differently in this age or that land, but at bottom a unity. Lewis distinguishes eight large laws of universal validity: the law of general beneficence; the law of special beneficence; duties to parents, elders, ancestors; duties to children and posterity; the law of justice; the law of good faith and veracity; the law of mercy; the law of magnanimity. Humane letters, as Lewis points out, have been a principal instrument for this teaching of ethical truth; yet in some degree this understanding of how we are to live with ourselves and with our neighbors used to run through every school discipline. What endured until not many years past may be raised up again, from painful necessity.

Would I go beyond this, all the way to political dogmata? Yes, I would—in moderation. I believe that there are social dogmas still vaguely recognized in America (though not wholly of American origin) well worth perpetuating. Among these are affirmation of the dignity of man; adherence to the benefits of representative government; understanding that the tolerable society maintains a tension between the claims of order and the claims of freedom; assertion that a humane and free economy is better than a servile economy. I would persuade teachers to believe in these first principles of the American Republic, and to pass them on. I find little benefit in vague discussions, in the classroom, of

whether it would be better to have a leader like Mao than a leader like Nixon, say. There exists a body of knowledge, sound and firm, about our political institutions; and the school ought to disseminate that knowledge, rather than asking "What do you think?" about matters for which the student has no basis of comparison.

Switzerland often is called an "open society." Yet I understand that in Switzerland it remains an offense at law for a teacher to cast doubt upon the truth of the legend of Wilhelm Tell. The Swiss still know that the very survival of a state depends upon shared convictions: upon the dogmas which give motive to action.

Nowadays we are not living in any ossified Egyptian or Peruvian society. We do not stand in peril of an unquestioning obedience to doctrines suckled in a creed outworn. The question for us, instead, is whether we may maintain enough respect for revelation and right reason to hold together the person and the republic. Without dogma, order and freedom and justice do not long endure.

Freedom? Dare I couple the words "freedom" and "dogma"? I do. It is dogmatic faith which makes possible personal and social freedom. Without some dogmas, the viewer is at the mercy of the seductions and the banalities of the boob-tube; without some dogmas, the university student is at the mercy of the silliest arrogant neoterist on the university's staff; without some dogmas, there is no reason why we should behave in community as spiritual brothers, or even as spiritual thirty-second cousins. Sound dogmata liberate us from enticement by fad and foible, from intellectual servility, from a society that is nothing better than a congeries of competing selfish interests.

Aye, I should like to hear less shallow talk about an "open mind"—if by that

phrase is meant a mind exposed to every wind of doctrine, weather-beaten, a gale blowing in one ear and out the other. It is not the open mind that caused the founding of schools: it was the hope of a filled mind.

And I should like to hear less about the vaunted "marketplace of ideas." School, college, and university are not commercial shopping-centers, and "at the Devil's booth all things are sold." Truth cannot be bought and sold. Does it never occur to the enthusiasts for the "intellectual marketplace" that in a time of educational inflation, such as ours, Gresham's Law may operate in the academy, so that bad currency drives out good? The old-fashioned notion of a "temple of learning" at least is closer to the end of schooling than is the false image of the educational marketplace, offering its customers shoddy merchandise at exorbitant prices. If this be educational freedom, give us again the credal regularity but the actual liberty of the medieval schools.

Rudyard Kipling makes my point for me, in "The Gods of the Copybook Headings":

As I pass through my incarnations in
every age and race,
I make my proper prostrations to the
God of the Market-Place.
Peering through reverent fingers I
watch them flourish and fall,
And the Gods of the Copybook Head-
ings, I notice, outlast them all.

Dogmas denied, the time comes when the Gods of the Copybook Headings with terror and slaughter return. I subscribe, however unfashionably, to the dogma that two and two make four, and to the dogma that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. In our time, the fear of dogma is the ruin of wisdom.*

*This article is based on a paper delivered at the national meeting of the Philadelphia Society held in April of 1977 in Chicago.