

## Chapter 5: Heathens of the Press

I was a fresh-from-the-sticks rookie climbing aboard the bus that could take me to a major-league journalism career. It was May 1976 and I was covering the Maryland state government and politics for United Press International, one of the two large wire services that provided most of the national and international news for the vast majority of newspapers around the country.

The nation's biggest political event of the month was the Maryland Democratic presidential primary between Georgia Gov. Jimmy Carter and California Gov. Jerry Brown. The upcoming election was critical because Carter had just smashed several of his rivals in the Pennsylvania primary and Brown was perceived as the last barrier to his winning the party's nomination. The high stakes -- along with Brown's quirky, bordering on flakey West Coast personality and Carter's populist, outsider, moral reformer zeal in the wake of the Watergate scandal -- prompted some of Washington's top political pundits and reporters to day-trip across the border to check out the action.

As I stepped onto Carter's press bus, I entered a pantheon of journalistic demigods: Sally Quinn and Mary McGrory of The Washington Post; Sam Donaldson of ABC News; Walter Mears of The Associated Press; Jim Perry of The Wall Street Journal among others.

The protocol was for one "pool" journalist to always accompany the candidate and report to the group in case a newsworthy event happened in the pack's absence. There was intense competition for the assignment that could lead to a special insight into the campaign or a pithy quote from the candidate that could prove journalistic gold.

Standing at the head of the bus, Carter press secretary Jody Powell had a unique method of choosing the pool reporter: a quiz. Perhaps intended as a subtle rebuke to the media's relentless sniping at Carter's unapologetic Christian faith and rural Southern Baptist roots, Powell posed this question: "What did Jesus use to heal the blind man?"

Total silence. Several dozen journalists at the top of their profession -- many of them among the most influential people in the country -- did not know an iconic New Testament story.

I waited several seconds, fearing to upstage my journalistic betters, then meekly raised my hand. “He used his own spit,” I replied.

Two minutes later, I was sitting next to Jimmy Carter in the backseat of a van that would take us to a campaign rally at a Baltimore union hall, asking him about campaign strategy, delving into his background, especially his “born-again” Christianity, and gathering other material that resulted in an in-depth profile soon to be featured in newspapers around the country.

My story, however, drew a frosty reception from some of my campaign colleagues. I was labeled a “Jesus freak” for my largely positive portrayal of Carter’s evangelical faith. I was accused of professional malfeasance by one prize-winning writer for not depicting Carter as a “snake-handling cracker” and noting that he was a deeply reflective man well-versed in Christian thought (which he demonstrated in his analysis of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr whose work I studied in graduate school).

The hardest hit, however, was the assertion that “a Christian can’t be a good journalist because he’d filter everything through religion.” Although my dismissive body language and “not me” vocal inflection recalled Peter’s denial of Christ, I responded that I knew Christian basics because I grew up in the Episcopal Church (the “safe” spiritual home of the establishment elite) and held a master’s degree in religious studies. That seemed to satisfy my inquisitor, but the message was loud and clear: Overt Christian belief could be a career killer. Ambition, the appeal of media status and the allure of celebrity easily trumped any temptation to proclaim the Gospel to my professional peers or readers. Not that I would have done so anyway. Anglicans are bad at proselytizing; it’s just not something we do.

Ironically, my religious knowledge proved to be a career maker. Apparently oblivious to reality, my esteemed colleagues seemed to miss that many of the most significant concerns of the era were rooted in religion: the civil rights crusade, the recent anti-Vietnam War movement, the abortion issue and emergence of the pro-life cause, the crises in the Mideast and Northern Ireland. My awareness of the power of faith added immensely to my understanding of current affairs in multiple realms.

More important, my budding journalism career had already proved to me some fundamental Christian truths, notably that we live in a fallen world.

A reporter never lacks for evidence of that biblical principle.

Like many journalists, I started my career on a community newspaper. Mine was the Burlington Hawk Eye, a 22,000 circulation daily serving a small, working-class Mississippi River city and its neighbors in southeast Iowa. I spent almost two years on the Hawk Eye's police and courts beat, usually reporting the dark side of human nature. Or, as my editor described it, "other people's tragedies." I wrote about a 3-year-old girl raped by her stepfather; a depressed young man fascinated by Japanese samurai disemboweled himself hari-kari style; a factory worker scalded to death after a vengeful co-worker pushed him into a cauldron of boiling cleaning solvent; a four-member family returning from vacation wiped out by a drunken driver, whose first response to police was "someone get me another beer." The daily police blotter was a fact-based rewrite of Dante's *Inferno*: an illicit love affair led to a husband's murder; a teenage prostitute battered senseless by her pimp; a drug-addled kid drowned after falling -- jumping? we never knew -- off a Mississippi River bridge.

It took about two weeks of such reporting to completely convince me of the doctrine of Original Sin -- that without God's salvation, humanity is forever doomed by its own core nature.

Although I witnessed the depths to which humanity can sink, I also saw God's work in the pain and grief that was my daily duty to report. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a martyr to the Nazis during World War II, believed that "our God is a suffering God" who endured the worst of the human experience -- humiliation, torture, betrayal -- and then died amid excruciating physical agony accompanied by the anguish of feeling abandoned by his Father and disciples. Hell on Earth, Jesus knew it.

But out of Jesus' torment comes liberation -- the true freedom of eternal life in Christ.

Part of my job included covering the Iowa State Penitentiary in Fort Madison. Within that massive 19th-century structure of limestone blocks, iron bars and guard towers, I discerned God's grace toward inmates convicted of the most heinous crimes. I wrote about a murderer, serving a life sentence for killing his parents as a teenager, who started a program that brought juvenile delinquents to the prison for "scared-straight therapy" in hopes of getting them on the right path.

Another lifer led an inside-the-walls chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous. One of his buddies earned a college degree and taught basic math and language skills to other prisoners. What did I learn from these men? That no one is beyond redemption; that an atrocious act often committed in a moment of unbridled rage need not sum up someone's life narrative; that hope often arrives through misfortune.

Taking a break from crime, I lost whatever tendency I had for partisan loyalty while covering a hotly contested Iowa congressional election between two good men: a business-oriented Rotary Club Republican and a union-backed George McGovern Democrat. Getting to know the candidates and their supporters, I concluded that most people come by their politics honestly through an often unconscious combination of happenstance -- family and class origins, education, job, financial status, religion or lack thereof -- that shaped their outlook on public affairs.

That's something Jesus understood, as evidenced by his attracting followers from virtually every political and economic sector of his society. People aren't ideologies; they are unique individuals seeking meaning and purpose in life. They deserve respect regardless of their politics. That awareness was invaluable to my reporting because it led me to study varying political philosophies that -- even if unacknowledged -- often inform public policy. I read Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek so I could intelligently discuss free-market economics with conservatives; I read John Dewey and John Rawls to comprehend the basis of modern liberalism.

The paramount Christian influence on my journalism was to recognize that the political "crisis of the day" is largely irrelevant in God's scheme for humanity. From the brutal, pagan Roman Empire of the first century A.D. to the communist dictatorship of modern China, Christianity has survived under every conceivable form of government or economic system. Although Jesus was crucified at least partly because he was perceived as a political threat to the powers-that-be of ancient Judea, he proclaimed that his kingdom "is not of this world." That means our true home is God's heaven, not a legislative district. It also freed me from the anger and toxic partisanship that often dominates American politics. My salvation doesn't depend on whether a Republican or Democrat is in the White House, but on my faith that God determines my ultimate destiny.

Coming from the Midwest where Sunday morning church and Wednesday night prayer punctuated the weekly routine, I was unprepared for the intense antipathy -- or, at best, blase indifference -- toward Christianity expressed by some East Coast journalists during the Maryland primary. I had entered a bizarre paradox, a place where a church might be fine for a wedding or funeral, but only the most delusional actually took faith seriously as a guide for life. To me, that attitude constituted journalistic malpractice. With more than 70 percent of Americans professing to be Christian, it would seem that political reporters might want to understand the basics of the religion. Yet they preferred to insult, caricaturize and mock the vast majority of the electorate they were supposed to serve.

Worse, some of the most influential voices in American public life displayed vast ignorance of the Judeo-Christian biblical narratives and concepts that laid the foundation for Western civilization and American democracy. Instead, they adopted a secular skepticism that all proclaimed truths are suspect and none has a valid claim to universality. Banished to the status of primitive myth is an all-encompassing God who created a common human nature and sustains a common human destiny.

Over the next few years as I climbed, clawed and worked my tail off to professional success, I noticed that the same attitude among my Carter-bus colleagues had permeated almost every category -- media, academia, corporate, government, entertainment -- of the nation's elite. Looking back, I see that the biggest story of my journalism career wasn't a political event or horrendous crime, but the transformation of American culture from a sacred to a secular template. The rest of this chapter charts how that happened. I know, because I was there.

## **Chapter 11: Ayn Rand's Stanford**

The following instructive maxims are carved into the interior sandstone walls of Memorial Church at Stanford University, selected by Jane Stanford whose

teenage son's death in 1884 prompted his family to name what has become one of the world's most prestigious academic institutions after him.

“The world is new to every soul when Christ has entered into it.”

“A life that is founded on the principle of goodness, love, wisdom and power that represents the Christ has a lasting foundation and can be trusted.”

“Wisdom is the highest spiritual intelligence, while the natural man, through knowledge, can know nothing of wisdom.”

In the early 1980s, I spent a year at Stanford in a fellowship program that brought a dozen mid-career journalists to Palo Alto, Calif., to study whatever subjects they thought would improve their professional abilities. For me, it was primarily English literature, which I hoped would enhance my writing skills and fill gaps in my undergraduate education. I often dropped by Memorial Church on breaks between classes and found Mrs. Stanford's inscriptions a wellspring for contemplation and self-reflection.

During a program reunion in 2013, I saw how far Stanford had diverged from the faith and moral convictions of its founders.

The event's speakers included the president of the university, John L. Hennessy, a wealthy technology entrepreneur who focused much of his tenure at Stanford forging strong ties between the school and the computer industry. He was especially proud that Stanford alumni had launched such tech powerhouses as Google, Yahoo, PayPal and Netflix.

He told this anecdote to sketch his model Stanford student: A group of undergraduates received a university grant to spend their summer developing a technological whizbang of some kind. They set up camp in an off-campus house and got to work. They darkened the windows, hunkered down over their computers, consumed vast amounts of cold pizza and ... came up with nothing. Under her breath a colleague quipped, “What those guys really needed was a girlfriend.” Their failure, however, delighted Hennessy as an example of gritty teamwork and the trial-and-error mindset of the tech world. To the president, they exemplified Stanford's culture. I interpreted him to mean that the loftiest goal of a Stanford education was to invent a high-tech gadget or process, make oodles of money and lord over everyone else as the smartest person in the room.

Forget Mrs. Stanford's Christian character, selfless virtue and divine wisdom. The inspirational mentor of today's Stanford isn't Socrates or Paul; it's the novelist and fiercely anti-Christian libertarian philosopher Ayn Rand (*The Fountainhead, Atlas Shrugged*), whose ethos permeates Silicon Valley.

"Man exists for his own sake, that the pursuit of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose, that he must not sacrifice himself to others, nor sacrifice others to himself," she said in a 1984 magazine interview. Not surprisingly, Vanity Fair in 2016 tabbed Rand as "perhaps the most influential figure" in the technology industry, surpassing Bill Gates and Steve Jobs.

Rather than Memorial Church's "Divine principle of God's truth," today's principal intellectual foundation at Stanford and many other major universities is the secular religion of scientism: the belief that the quantifiable and empirical methods of natural science are the only means to legitimate knowledge. Unless something can be put under a microscope or in a test tube it has no hold on Ultimate Reality. Banished are such metaphysical testaments as a loving God creating the universe, leaving only, in the words of comparative religion scholar Huston Smith, a world "emptied of purpose, a chain of effects without final causes, wherein all that mattered was matter."

Repeating the sin of Adam and Eve, the tragedy of Faust, the gothic horror of Dr. Frankenstein -- the craving to seize divine knowledge for humanity -- scientific triumphalism sees the natural world and human nature as something to be controlled by the power of human ingenuity. While Judeo-Christian tradition perceived a world filled with cosmic and spiritual significance, scientific dogma offers only a soulless, meaningless existence, essentially "life's a bitch and then you die." Truth, justice, beauty, all matters of religion and notions of good and evil have no independent validity and are subject only to the vagaries of culture, politics and personal preference.

Having dismissed the transcendent as a factor in natural or human reality, Stanford also has trashed the historic academic core of Western Civilization.

Several years after I left Stanford, the Rev. Jesse Jackson rallied a few hundred protesters to demand revisions in the school's required introductory humanities program known as Western Culture. Chanting "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Civ has got to go," the demonstrators claimed the course curriculum

lacked racial, gender and ethnic diversity, concentrating on “dead white men.” The university caved in to the demands and, in 1987, some of the seminal thinkers of European and American history were sacrificed to the zealotry of identity politics. No longer would Stanford undergraduates be expected to trace their own society’s intellectual path from Jerusalem through Athens and Rome and on to the Renaissance and Enlightenment. To the contrary, the new curriculum was a mush of trendy topics and obscure authors whose prime merits were not intellectual but that they passed the litmus tests of political correctness.

"Stanford students are to be indoctrinated with ephemeral ideologies and taught that there can be no intellectual resistance to one's own time and its passions," noted Allan Bloom, author of the 1980s best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, which lamented the denigration of the humanities in higher education. "This total surrender to the present and abandonment of the quest for standards with which to judge it are the very definition of the closing of the American mind, and I could hope for no more stunning confirmation of my thesis."

The Stanford course list for the fall 2018 semester finds little-to-no effort to ensure that students graduate with an appreciation for the value of character and the pursuit of truth so prized by Mrs. Stanford. Instead, many courses outside science and math centered on inclusion, gender and societal transformation. The religious studies department, for example, had no course in Christian theology, but offered “Sex and the Early Church.”

By gutting the traditional “great books” curriculum, rejecting spiritual insights as means to knowledge and displaying an almost Maoist intensity to control thoughts that defy leftist orthodoxy, Stanford and other colleges are dangerously close to fulfilling George Orwell’s prophecy in his novel *1984*:

“Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street building has been renamed ... History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right.”

Substitute “neo-Marxism” for the Party and you pretty much have the agenda of today’s academic left. I know because while at Stanford I took a course in the Marxist revisionist Frankfurt School that included such “critical theory” philosophers as Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert



Marcuse who are intellectual godfathers of today's progressive cultural politics. Interestingly, while postmodern academics deplore dead white male founders of American democracy like Thomas Jefferson, they adore dead white male German Marxists.

The secular academia's reluctance to transmit the Western intellectual heritage to the next generation and its adherence to doctrinaire scientism denies students founts of wisdom critical to human flourishing.

Huston Smith, who taught at MIT and contested with colleagues over truth claims, accuses academics of overreach in their assertion that natural science has a monopoly on discerning reality: "An absence of evidence does not mean evidence of absence."

As long ago as the 17th century, writers defended the cognitive validity of metaphysical revelations:

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Shakespeare's Hamlet tells his friend.

"The heart has reason that reason knows not," said French philosopher Blaise Pascal to counter the scientism of his era.

The contention by postmodern humanities professors that "truth" is only personal opinion based on individual experience violates historic scholarly standards and leads to the disastrous philosophy of relativism: the logical contradiction that "the only truth is that there is no truth." When right and wrong, truth and error, can no longer be distinguished everything comes down to power. All is permitted -- violence, intimidation -- to impose one's moral vision on others. Thus the chaos on many elite colleges today.

History teaches it can't end well. Observed British writer Roger Scruton, "Downstream from Christianity, there is every possibility that our societies will either become unmoored entirely or be hauled onto a very different shore."

The collateral damage from campus postmodernism is immense. Freed from traditional moral restraints, denied a coherent intellectual framework and lacking a solid spiritual core, unprecedented numbers of students have become psychological basketcases. According to a 2018 study cited in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, 39 percent of college students reported symptoms of depression and anxiety. The National Alliance on Mental Illness estimates that a quarter of college students

have suicidal thoughts, and the American College Health Association says suicide rates among young people have tripled since the 1950s. Research by the University of Michigan found that college students today were 40 percent less empathetic than were their peers in the 1980s.

Although some of this psychic carnage can be linked to economic concerns and competitive pressures to climb “the greasy pole of meritocratic success,” many students feel a profound emptiness within and lack a strong sense of personal control over their lives. Author of the book *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, former Yale Professor William Deresiewicz said, “These are kids who have no ability to measure their own worth in any realistic way -- either you are on top of the world, or you are worthless.”

This lack of purpose and introspective awareness will inevitably lead many contemporary collegians to an emotionally and spiritually vacuous existence marked by moral nihilism. A life built on postmodernism can end no other way.

The core of postmodernism is the self-deification of the individual. The self reigns sovereign. The elite meritocracy, however, sees this exalted self as a collection of accomplishments -- wealth, power, status -- that have scant relationship to the classical Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity. While Christianity believes the self is subject to divine authority and must restrain its passions to grow in dignity and integrity, postmodernism argues that humanity should be largely exempt from any obligations that might hinder personal freedom. While Christianity embeds individuals in a web of community, custom and ethical constraints to help them cope with their post-fall sinful nature, postmodernism sees such restrictions as limiting human potential and autonomy.

For postmodernists the liberated self chooses itself. For Christians, the God-infused soul creates the Self. How that happens is the subject of the next chapter.