

The Revolt against the Establishment: *God and Man at Yale at 50*

This year marks the golden anniversary of the publication of one of the seminal books in modern American conservatism, William F. Buckley Jr.'s *God and Man at Yale*. Without it, one could fairly say, the conservative movement would not exist today. Soon after winning national attention with this controversial polemic, Buckley deployed his youth, charm, and intellect to unite a motley crew of cantankerous intellectuals into a viable conservative movement. Less than a generation after Lionel Tilling famously opined that "in the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition," Buckley had in large part caused the liberal consensus to unravel.

For all of its fame, however, *God and Man at Yale* is as noteworthy as a failure as it is as a success. Buckley's call for Yale alumni to withhold financial support until Yale ceased to undermine her students' faith in Christianity and the free market went almost entirely unheeded; today Yale is more secular and left-wing than ever. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to view the book as a mere historical artifact, for Buckley's tocsin rings as loudly today as it did then, and the controversy over the

book's argument is well worth revisiting.

So decisive has been the rout of Christianity at Yale that anyone under the age of fifty now can hardly imagine how Buckley's book could have caused as much controversy as it did, much less why Buckley should have become at the time the object of such intense vituperation. McGeorge Bundy called Buckley a "violent, twisted, and ignorant young man," and questioned both the "honesty of his method" and the "measure of his intelligence." Frank Ashburn, founder of the Brooks School, called him "Torquemada, reincarnated in his early twenties" and insinuated that he should be wearing not academic robes but those of the Ku Klux Klan. Henry Sloane Coffin, the former president of Union Theological Seminary who chaired a blue-ribbon committee to respond to Buckley's charges, wrote snidely that Buckley, a Roman Catholic, "should have attended Fordham or some similar [Catholic] institution."

If these attacks seem personal, that is because they were. All of the major players in the effort to discredit Buckley hailed

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from old-line Yale families. Many of them, including Coffin, McBundy, and Ashburn, belonged (like Buckley himself) to Skull and Bones. Charles Seymour, the President of Yale while Buckley was an undergraduate, was himself a Bonesman, while A. Whitney Griswold, the Yale President when the book was published, came from a Bones family. Buckley's attackers thus saw themselves as custodians of a great tradition; their religion was liberal Protestant, their outlook modern, and their sensibility elitist. To them, Roman Catholicism, like Evangelical Protestantism, was the religion of the lower classes—publicly tolerated but privately derided. Buckley in consequence was not so much a Torquemada as a latter-day Alaric who, upon being invited into the very citadel of Northeastern WASP prestige, had the *gaucherie* to question its continued legitimacy.

Part of the difficulty in understanding the controversy over *God and Man at Yale* is that the class distinctions that made Buckley such an unwelcome guest have become blurred since the 1960s. Students today associate religious conservatism with Establishment stuffiness, whereas in truth the leaders of the American Establishment at mid-century contemned both religious enthusiasm and religious orthodoxy. To be sure, the social prestige of men such as Bundy and Coffin could only exist within a Christian society whose mainline churches dominated the universities, and in turn, the government and the culture. Ironically, had the old Yale scions only followed Buckley's prescriptions, they might not have seen their regime crumble around them in the 1960s. Perhaps an even greater irony is that Buckley's urbanity and charm have made him perhaps the last living icon of the traditional high-WASP temperament.

In 1951, however, he was but a barbarian who had somehow found his way into the

inner temple. His arguments in *God and Man at Yale* were straightforward: first, Yale was undermining students' faith in Christianity; second, Yale was promoting economic collectivism; and third, alumni should exert their influence to reverse the course of pedagogy at Yale. His critics refused, however, to take these points at face value, but rather insisted that the book was not what it seemed. Fulminated Ashburn, "[*God and Man at Yale*] stands as one of the most forthright, implacable, typical, and unscrupulously sincere examples of a return to authoritarianism that has appeared. Under the guise of liberty it attacks freedom; under the guise of knowledge it denies the privilege of free investigation and dissent; under the guise of defending capitalism and religion it uses the technique of Dr. Goebbels; under the guise of academic freedom it hides the somber robes of theocracy."

How did a book about pedagogy at Yale inspire a philippic against totalitarianism? Ashburn was not alone in leveling such charges at Buckley; every one of his critics construed the book as an attack not only on Yale, but also, despite Buckley's professed belief in democracy and freedom, as a veiled attack on the very nature of a free society. Certainly they could not have inferred this insidious purpose from the substance of Buckley's arguments. In reaching the book's first two conclusions, Buckley was scrupulous almost to a fault in examining Yale department by department, professor by professor, in order to assess the effect each was having on students' spiritual lives and political convictions. Indeed, much of the debate over the book focused not so much on questions of fact but on questions of interpretation. Buckley found that the drift of Keynesian economics was collectivist; his critics insisted that Lord Keynes merely defended the free market from itself. Buckley presupposed that Christianity entailed

adherence to the orthodox tenets of the faith; his critics thought that mere interest in Christian spirituality sufficed to demonstrate the strength of religion on campus. Although in each case Buckley upheld the more rigorous view, the differences were surely not so great as to put him in the camp of Dr. Goebbels.

God and Man at Yale's third charge—that alumni should exercise control over the teaching at Yale—was more controversial still. Buckley deconstructed the idea of academic freedom from two angles. First, pure academic freedom was a mirage, he claimed, for Yale would (quite rightly) never allow an anthropologist to teach theories of Aryan racial superiority. Thus, the question was not whether academic freedom should be restricted, but to what extent. Second, romantic notions to the contrary notwithstanding, truth does not always win out

in the free marketplace of ideas. Both Italy and Germany, Buckley observed, had the option to elect democratic leaders or authoritarians, but both chose the latter rather than the former. If we indeed know that democracy is superior to totalitarianism, then we have a duty to defend and advance this truth rather than to maintain a falsely “open” question. In sum, Buckley argued, Yale should restrict academic freedom such that Christianity and political freedom are always upheld.

In response, Buckley’s critics only blustered. Bundy, after falsely accusing Buckley’s father of sending a copy of *God and Man at Yale* to every Yale alumnus, wrote that “Mr. Buckley does not seem to know what academic freedom is” and that

“he leaps from one view to another, as suits his convenience.” Never, however, did Bundy bother to define *his* understanding of academic freedom, nor did he respond to either of Buckley’s principal arguments for restricting academic freedom. The same went for Ashburn: “[Buckley’s] thesis, stripped to its essentials, is that the way to academic freedom is dogmatism and that the way to save capitalism is by indoctrination.” Ashburn’s only follow-up, however, was purely *ad hominem*: “[Buckley’s] point

of view [is] shared, of course, by Marshal Stalin as a staunch supporter of what millions of people sincerely call democracy.”

Ashburn and Bundy could not respond to Buckley’s arguments for the simple reason that their own position was deeply mired in contradiction. While they agreed with Buckley that Yale was or should be a

Christian university, they also believed that, as Coffin put it, “[i]n the ideal university all sides of any issue are presented as impartially and as forcefully as possible.” If Yale were equally open to all ideas, it could not also promote Christianity above all other comprehensive worldviews; if Yale were devoted to promoting Christianity above all other comprehensive worldviews, it could not also be equally open to all others. Buckley’s critics could defend Christianity or they could defend openness, but not both. Contrary to Bundy’s assertion, it was he and not Buckley who leapt from one view to the other, as suited his convenience.

Hindsight reveals that, as Buckley no doubt suspected, Yale’s elite preferred openness to Christianity. In the late 1960s,



William F. Buckley, Jr.

Yale President Kingman Brewster (who himself came from a family of Bonesmen) took liberal modernism to its logical conclusion and, finding no grounds on which to oppose violent student radicals, propitiated them, going so far as to opine at the time of the Bobby Seale trial that a black man could never get a fair trial in the United States. McGeorge Bundy, in turn, rushed to Brewster's defense. Alas for Yale, since the Great Disruption on American campuses, the University has suffered a marked decline in prestige. Having lost its unrivaled social cachet, Yale has struggled to keep up with Harvard in becoming an elite research university and has failed to reestablish an identity for itself (other than, perhaps, as a haven for an obstreperous homosexual community).

In a sense, then, Buckley's critics were right to infer from *God and Man at Yale's* attacks on openness in the academy an attack on the open society in general. The conflict over the role of the university paralleled a conflict over the nature of American society just as much in the early 1950s as it did in the late 1960s. Buckley had a radically different understanding of the nature of totalitarianism from that of his critics. In his most notorious passage, he wrote that "the duel between Christianity and atheism is the most important in the world...[and] the struggle between individualism and collectivism is the same struggle reproduced on another level." Elsewhere, he quoted approvingly Yale President Charles Seymour, who as late as 1937 could respond to the events in Germany by proclaiming that Yale had a duty to fight "selfish materialism" through the "maintenance and upbuilding of the Christian religion as a

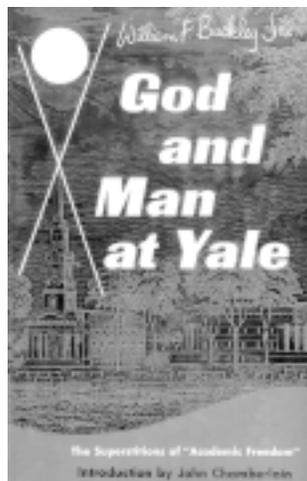
vital part of university life." In other words, according to Buckley, totalitarianism arises from a philosophical denial of God which leads to a denial of any higher authority for human institutions. The state thus has absolute authority over all other institutions—family, church, market—all of which can be manipulated for the social or scientific ends of the state.

Though these comments had little to do with the central argument of the book, they set in high relief the most fundamental differences between Buckley and his critics.

Ashburn and Bundy thought that the problem of totalitarianism arises not from the dominance of a secular orthodoxy, but rather from the dominance of any orthodoxy whatsoever. Their argument is familiar to the point of banality: anyone who makes an exclusive claim to the truth will then attempt to impose this truth upon everyone else. All dissent will be eliminated, to the point

where a single orthodoxy is imposed, as in a one-party totalitarian government. Buckley's understanding of a free society would require that a certain public orthodoxy—which celebrates the West's Christian and liberal heritage—be upheld, whereas Bundy's would require that none be upheld. Not only are an "open society" and the "free society" not identical; in Buckley's view, it was the "open society" which paved the road to modern totalitarianism.

Which understanding was correct? Theory and history vindicate Buckley. Ashburn's liberalism shares with "selfish materialism" an antipathy to markets, or at least to any claim that the state has only a limited right to interfere in the market. As



in communist or fascist ideology, all institutions are understood as mere human inventions, and individuals do not have any rights apart from those granted by men. Thus, no institution or person has any authority independent of or prior to the state. Bundy, Ashburn, *et. al.* may have objected to full-blown collectivism, but they could only do so on prudential grounds. Buckley's "individualist" notion that the state's authority has moral limits was alien to them.

Consequently, it was not the secular liberals with their gentlemanly theories of engagement and détente who at length brought about the defeat of communism in our time, but leaders such as Thatcher, Reagan, and Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II), all of whom shared the conviction that the Soviet Union was the "evil empire" of the century just past. Without the fundamentally moral attack on communism that Bundy *et. al.* found so apparently distasteful, its defeat would have been impossible. Interestingly, just as it took an outsider such as Buckley to reveal what was really going on at Yale, so it took an outsider such as Reagan to bear witness to the true nature of communism. Only by ignoring the wisdom of this country's secular liberal elites and taking their case directly to the people could Buckley's and Reagan's conservative movement have succeeded. Buckley may have first learned about the moral flaccidity of the American elite from his Yale mentor, the "Appalachians to the Rockies" American, Willmoore Kendall; but he also experienced that lack of moral resolve firsthand in the controversy over *God and Man at Yale*.

The only question remaining is why the WASP elites ever adopted a philosophy—that of the open society—that not only harmed their country but also undermined their very position as leaders of a Christian society. Part of the reason may have been

nothing more than social snobbery. The more enthusiastic the religion of the masses became, the more modernist and liberal became that of the upper crust. This explanation, however, is not decisive, for it sometimes happens, as in the Victorian era, that the upper classes, which can always afford to flirt with libertinism, nonetheless adopt the rigorist morality of the lower or middle classes.

The best explanation may be simply that the last scions of the old-line WASP families were mediocre men. They found the philosophy of the "open society" congenial because it did not demand much of them. They preferred governance to politics, policy to ideology, and prudence to moral aspiration. Buckley offended them because he called them to a higher duty than they were prepared to assume. Little did they realize, however, that the moral capital from which they drew their authority—built by the generations of men who had founded, defended, and advanced this nation—was nearly depleted. Buckley the "barbarian" was, despite their protestations, their last, best hope to defend the heritage that they took for granted.

After half a century, *God and Man at Yale* remains a testament to the power of one man to stand up for the truth. Few realize today what courage it must have taken for Buckley to write such a book, knowing how much it would offend the very men who had tapped him into the Yale elite. Buckley's philosophy of "Christian individualism," which combined a distrust of the omnipotent state with a defense of the truths of the Judeo-Christian tradition, remains as much the core of American conservatism—and, indeed, of the American tradition—in our own time as it did in 1951. Let us hope that fifty years from now Buckley's exemplary defense of the American patriarchy will continue to inspire.