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Dr Benjamin Rush, America's leading physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, was probably the most articulate and comprehensive spokesman for the true meaning of the American Revolution.

Dr. Benjamin Rush (1746-1813) and the Judaeo-Christian Origins of American Education

Donald J. D'Elia

Any discussion of the educational thought of the Founding Fathers of the American Republic in the late twentieth century, if it lays claim to historical accuracy and is not simply a variation on the prejudices of the day, must first come to terms with the post-medieval naturalism that is best exemplified in America by William James and John Dewey. If we are going to address the origins and historical development of the contemporary sociology of knowledge we must appreciate the chasm that divides modern thought from the eighteenth century American worldview.

This is obviously beyond the scope of this paper, which is limited to notes on what might be called needs and opportunities for further research and writing in the history of early American education. In this brief essay I use the example of Dr. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a leading revolutionary patriot as representative of the American people at the time of the nation's founding.

The insightful work on education by people such as James Hillestad, Russell and Annette Kirk and some of the others represented in this issue have greater clarity for us if we keep in mind the nature of the modern world that is coming to an end before our very eyes. That world, in which all of us were born and reared, was brilliantly characterized by Romano Guardini in his *The End of the Modern World*, first

published in war-torn Germany in 1950. The post-medieval world, argued Guardini, came to rest on three presuppositions, each of devastating consequence for man.

The ancient Hebrews and early Christians knew man as the *image* and likeness of God. Modern man saw himself not as *image* but as *reality*, the new Absolute that could exist first independently of the Church and then by his own finite resources. Man became autonomous. And with Man's declaration of independence from God, his rejection of the mystical union for which he was created, nature and culture became autonomous. Man, nature, and culture lost their reference to God and became distortions of what they were supposed to be in the divine plan. Jesus, who "knew what was in the heart of man," warned mankind of the consequences of its preferring itself to the Creator and viewing itself as the ultimate ground of all things. "Without Me," the Truth Himself proclaimed, "you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

While these presuppositions about the autonomy of man, nature, and culture describe modern man's understanding of education we must not make the unfortunately common mistake of attributing such naturalism to all of the founders of the American Republic. At the time of the American Revolution, we insist against the still prevalent sociology of knowledge which exaggerates the influence of Thomas Jefferson and the Enlightenment, that the naturalism of Herbert of Cherbury and Jean Jacques Rousseau played only a minor role in thinking about education. The "dogma of the primacy and all-sufficiency of nature" was as widely accepted as now presumed by many.

These and other introductory observations about the differences between early American education and the naturalistic training of today have been summarized, in effect, by Jacques Maritain. We can do no better than to repeat his "Seven Misconceptions of Modern Education" which should be the starting-point of any history of American education.² They are:

1. A Disregard of Ends
2. False ideas Concerning the End
3. Pragmatism
4. Sociologism
5. Intellectualism
6. Voluntarism
7. Everything Can Be Learned

Allowing for some differences between Protestant and Catholic scholasticism in the Calvinistic tradition of the eighteenth century American Christian culture, the fact remains that Maritain's analysis has a particular relevancy in United States history.³ These seven misconceptions of modern education, each traceable to the radical secularization and deformation of man, nature, and culture discussed by Guardini and Maritain, were not yet held by the majority of Americans in the eighteenth century. But it is also true that Enlightenment thinkers like Thomas Jefferson and Dr. Benjamin Franklin, good men that they were, were leading agents of the modern worldview with its new autonomies of man, nature, and culture. Theirs was a radically secularized and distorted picture of the world based on understandings which in our day has caused much damage to traditional Western Civilization generally and to education in particular.⁴ These *philosophes*, though, were a distinct minority. Revealed Protestant Christianity was the norm of American society. If we forget this, as too many academic historians tend to do, the past will elude us and we shall become, in Pascal's terrifying phrase—"children of the present."

The Role of Dr. Benjamin Rush

Dr. Benjamin Rush (1745-1813), America's leading physician and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was

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probably the most articulate and comprehensive spokesman for the meaning of the American Revolution. A deeply religious man, formed in the New Light Presbyterian schools of the Great Awakening, Rush's principal concern was with the social message of the New Testament and making Jesus' teaching about God and man the basis of a new Christendom in America. I have discussed this theology and philosophy of the American Revolution elsewhere.⁵ What I propose to do here is to introduce Dr. Benjamin Rush as a representative of eighteenth century American Christian culture, especially in his detailed plan for a new, American system of education which, contrary to the modern philosophies of Jefferson, Franklin, and others, included both Christian revelation and natural reason at all levels.

Rush's plan for what he called a "Revolutionary system of education" should not be thought of as revolutionary in the modern sense of anti-traditional. In his understanding, which he shared with practically everyone at the time, "revolutionary" meant more radical and systematic approaches in the etymological sense of getting back to the roots of things. The fact that Dr. Rush is recognized as the "Father of Dickenson College," and was the charter trustee of another, Franklin and Marshall College, demonstrates that his philosophy of education was taken seriously by his fellow citizens. But this should come as no surprise to anyone who reads contemporary eighteenth century newspapers, magazines, and other representative materials and refuses to be victimized by that most cunning enemy of historical truth— anachronism!

Before I give what can only be a survey here, the point should be made that Dr. Rush's ideas on education have meaning only within his framework of thought, i.e. the larger Christian culture or pre-modern way of life that virtually everyone accepted. For Dr. Rush, the pauline theology of love was the basis of the new society of "new men" which his divine Master had called into existence by His redemptive sacrifice. This charity or love was supernatural; St. Paul called it the "bond of perfection." (Col. 3:12-15) Rush's mentors in the "Schools of the Prophets" had taught him well that this supernatural principle was meant by its Divine Author to transform men into other Christs and to revolutionize fallen society into a community of love.

This "royal law," as St. James had called Christian brotherly love, was the first principle in Rush's educational thought. And here the contrast with Jefferson and Franklin is most acute. They could go no higher than natural reason in their plans for American education. This is seen in Jefferson's dedication to the secularization of the College of William and Mary while he was a trustee, and even more notably in his founding of the University of Virginia in 1819. Dr. Franklin's role in the establishment of the University of Pennsylvania also reflects his Enlightenment naturalism and utilitarianism. Rush's integral Christianity, his belief that man and society are meant to be sacred—because raised to a new, supernatural participation in Christ—is indeed revolutionary and only a finer articulation of what most Americans believed.

This supernatural participation in Christ, foreshadowed in the Old Testament and finally achieved in the perfect obedience of the New Adam, was the ultimate **democracy** for Rush. "The history of the creation of man, and of the relation of our species to each other by birth, which is recorded in the Old Testament," he wrote in his essay on education in the new Republic of the United States, "is the best refutation that can be given to the divine right of kings, and the strongest argument that can be used in favor of the original and natural equality of all mankind."⁶ To Dr. Charles Nisbet, the Scottish Presbyterian clergyman whom Rush

wanted to be first president of Dickenson College, the American claimed that his country seemed "destined by Heaven to exhibit to the world the perfection which the mind of man is capable of receiving from the combined operation of liberty, learning, and the Gospel upon it." There could be no true liberty and no true learning without Christian revelation. Education without religion was devoid of virtue, Rush and the majority of Americans agreed. Virtue was indispensable to liberty, which was "the object of life of all republican governments." Christianity, as Rush had learned as a student in the evangelical Presbyterian "Schools of the Prophets" at the College of New Jersey (Princeton) and elsewhere, made men virtuous and free.

Rush wrote in his essay on the defence of the Bible as a school book:

"We profess to be republicans and yet we neglect the only means of establishing and perpetuating our republican forms of government, that is, the universal education of our youth in the principles of Christianity, by means of the Bible; for the divine book, above all others, favours that equality among mankind, that respect for just laws, and all those sober and frugal virtues, which constitute the soul of republicanism."⁷

It was clear to the Philadelphian doctor that the Bible should be used as a textbook in all American schools. He went even further and suggested that the different churches should provide catechists for the tax-supported schools, making sure that young people learned the doctrines of their faith during regular hours.⁸

In his *An Enquiry into the Influence of the Physical Causes Upon the Moral Faculty* (1786), Dr. Rush broke new ground in showing how the moral faculties as well as the mental were subject to derangement and medical treatment. A pioneer in physiological psychology and the study of behavioral disorders, this devout Christian thinker was also the author of the nation's first textbook in psychiatry.⁹ The American Psychiatric Association's seal bears his portrait, in effect recognizing the religious origins of psychiatry in this country.

As a doctor of the soul and a social reformer, Rush saw the new moral and intellectual therapy as the ultimate physics of reform, that perfect synthesis of Christian faith and natural reason that would produce the "new man" and the fraternal community described by St. Paul and in the Acts of the Apostles. Religion and philosophy must work together to educate men and women as persons, as the images of God that they were meant to be. Once this was accomplished, Rush with his evangelical millenarian doctrine believed, true social justice must prevail. For it was the lack of brotherly love that was responsible for the exploitation of the poor, Blacks, women, native Americans, and other minorities whose interests—especially in the field of education—Rush defended in the newspapers and magazines of the time.

All that good and learned men had to do, Rush concluded in his above cited *Enquiry*, was to multiply

"... the objects of human reason, to bring the monarchs and rulers of the world under their subjection, and thereby to extirpate war, slavery, and capital punishments from the list of human evils. Let it not be suspected that I detract, by this declaration, from the honor of the Christian religion. It is true, Christianity was propagated without the aid of human learning; but this was one of those miracles which was necessary to establish it, and which, by repetition, would cease to be a miracle. They misrepresent the Christian religion who suppose it to be wholly an internal revelation and addressed only to the moral faculties of the

mind. The truths of Christianity afford the greatest scope for the human understanding, and they will become intelligible to us only in proportion as the human genius is stretched by means of philosophy to the utmost dimensions. Errors may be opposed to errors; but truths, upon all subjects, mutually support each other. And perhaps one reason why some parts of the Christian revelation are still involved in obscurity may be occasioned by our imperfect knowledge of the phenomena and laws of nature."

Rush's scholasticism, which Professor James J. Walsh has demonstrated as normative in the curricula of the colonial colleges, is here clear enough. "The truths of philosophy and Christianity dwell alike in the mind of the Deity," Rush continued as he drew from the medieval, Thomistic tradition which was otherwise foreign to him as a Protestant.

"Reason and religion are equally the offspring of his goodness. They must, therefore, stand and fall together. By reason, in the present instance, I mean the power of judging of truth, as well as the power of comprehending it. Happy era! When the divine and the philosopher shall embrace each other, and unite their labours for the reformation and happiness of mankind!"

Rush's physics of moral and social reform, his millenarian belief that the all-loving God has made available to mankind in divine revelation and natural reason the means to regain paradise on earth, was characteristically American, as any student of the history of religion knows.¹² But Jefferson's and Franklin's buoyant Enlightenment optimism, their Pelagian refusal to deal with original and personal sin, may also be dismissed by the realist as nothing more than a species of Western utopianism.¹³ In any case the kind of optimism mattered little. Men like Rush, Jefferson, and Franklin defiantly built the nation regardless of the verdict of the ages.

No American at the time did more than this evangelical Christian physician to reform his society. He was a leader of the anti-slavery movement, whose religious origins modern historians tend to forget in another example of misplaced zeal for the influence of the Enlightenment in American social history. Seeing Christ in his fellow-man, especially the poor, Dr. Rush established the first free medical dispensary in America in 1786; also in Philadelphia he was a lifelong member of the staff of the Pennsylvania Hospital, where he worked tirelessly for the humane treatment of the mentally ill. Again and again, inspired by his deep Christian faith, Rush called out for the abolition of cruel and capital punishments. In the same way, his voice was heard among those who demanded that prisons be places of reform and not centers of depravity. To this day the American temperance movement honors him as its founder.

In his crusade to extend "the kingdom of Christ" and the "empire of reason and science in our country," Rush helped establish the Young Ladies' Academy in Philadelphia, where he hoped to eliminate the "present immense disparity which subsists between the sexes, in the degrees of their education and knowledge." He was a prime mover in founding the first Black church in America, even drawing up its articles of faith and a plan of government. "It may be followed by churches upon a similar plan in other States," he wrote in his journal that same year, 1791, "and who knows but it may be the means of sending the Gospel to Africa, as the American Revolution sent liberty to Europe?"¹⁴ To his English Quaker friend, Granville Sharp, Rush explained:

"In spreading the blessings of liberty, and religion, our Divine Master forbids us, in many of His parables and precepts, to have either friends or country. The globe

is the native country, and the whole human race, the fellow-citizens of the Christian."¹⁵

To no one's surprise, the Christian reformer urged in his writings that Pennsylvania take the lead in the formal education of Blacks, while publicly acknowledging that much could be learned from Africans and native Americans about the cure of diseases.¹⁶

But of Rush's reform proposals for the new Christian nation, as he conceived it, surely the most radical was that of what he called a Peace-Office for the Federal Government of the United States which he had worked so hard to bring into existence. Just as there was a Secretary of War, he argued, there ought to be a Secretary of Peace,

"... a genuine republican and a sincere Christian, for the principles of republicanism and Christianity are no less friendly to universal and perpetual peace than they are to universal and equal liberty. Let a power be given to this secretary to establish and maintain free-schools in every city, village and township of the United States and let him be made responsible for the talents, principles, and morals of all his schoolmasters. Let the youth of our country be carefully instructed in reading, writing, arithmetic, and the doctrines of a religion of some kind: the Christian religion should be preferred to all others, for it belongs to this religion exclusively to teach us not only to cultivate peace with men, but to forgive, nay more—to love our very enemies. It belongs to it further to teach us that the Supreme Being alone possesses a power to take away human life, and that we rebel against His laws whenever we undertake to execute death in any way whatever upon any of His creatures."

Rush proposed that over the door of every state and court house in the new nation there should be engraved in gold, "The Son of Man came into the world not to destroy men's lives, but to save them." Familiarity with the "instruments of death" should be avoided; and military titles, uniforms, and parades should be abolished along with militia laws. The Secretary of Peace should provide every family in the United States with an American edition of the Bible at public expense!¹⁷

"Peace on Earth—Good will to man. Ah! Why will men forget that they are brethren?"¹⁸ These were the words that Dr. Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence, father of American psychiatry, and perhaps the nation's greatest reformer and teacher of social justice proposed to guide us. They were to be placed over the door of the Peace Office of the United States and, true to the Judaeo-Christian tradition in which Rush was formed, were beliefs instilled in every boy and girl born in America. As the nation's most influential professor at the Medical School at the University of Pennsylvania, and everything he wrote, Rush exhorted himself and his fellow citizens to imitate Christ in the new life which He made possible. This was the incorporation of all men and women into the supernatural life of the God-Man, the brotherhood of man in the fatherhood of God.

Dr. Benjamin Rush's ideal was—and remains for those of us who follow him—that described in the Acts of the Apostles. It is the same ideal that inspired the Christian founders of the Middle Ages, visionaries like Christopher Columbus in the Age of Discovery, and Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish colonists from New Spain to Massachusetts Bay Colony, Maryland, and beyond.

"Then, one of them (the Pharisees) which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting Him, and saying, master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,

and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. and the second is like unto it, Though shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matt. 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-31)

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- ³Essential are James J. Walsh, *The Education of the Founding Fathers of the Republic; Scholasticism in the Colonial Colleges: A Neglected Chapter in the History of American Education* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1935), passim; and Christopher Dawson, *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture: A Way to the Renewal of Human Life* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960). Cf. my "We Hold These Truths," and More: Further Catholic Reflections On the American Proposition" in the book by the same title, ed. by Stephen M. Krason and Donald J. D'Elia (Steubenville, Ohio: Franciscan University Press, Forthcoming).
- ⁴For an extended post-modern analysis of the American founding fathers, see my *The Spirits of '76: A Catholic Inquiry* (Front Royal, Va.: Christendom College Press, 1983).
- ⁵*Benjamin Rush: Philosopher of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1974); idem, "The Republican Theology of Benjamin Rush," *Pennsylvania History* 33, (April, 1966).
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- ⁷December 5, 1783, *Letters of Benjamin Rush* ed. Lyman H. Butterfield (2 v., Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1951), 1: 316.
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- ¹¹Rush, *Enquiry*, in Dr. Carlson's edition, pp. 38-39
- ¹²For the American Revolution as a "work of reformation," a recurring theme of the times, see, e.g., Cushing Strout, *The New Heavens and New Earth: Political Religion in America* (New York, 1974). Standard are Perry Miller, "From the Covenant to the Revival," in James W. Smith and A.L. Jamison, eds., *The Shaping of American Religion*, vol. 1 of *Religion in American Life* (4 vols.: Princeton, New Jersey, 1961), 325, 339; and Edward F. Humphrey, *Nationalism and Religion in America, 1774-1789* (New York, 1965).
- ¹³Cf. Thomas Molnar, *Utopia: the Perennial Heresy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967).
- ¹⁴On the education of women, see Rush's "Thoughts upon Female Education," *Essays, Literary, Moral, and Philosophical*. American women, human persons made in the image and likeness of God, must be provided with the best possible education in knowledge and virtue. This was not only their due as children of the Eternal Father; it was even more necessary in the new nation because of the great influence they were expected to exert in a Christian and republican society, pp. 81-89, 91-92. For the journal entry, see George W. Corner, ed., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Rush: His "Travels through Life" Together with his Common-place Book for 1789-1813* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 202.
- ¹⁵Runes, ed., p. 25. See D.J. D'Elia, "Benjamin Rush and the Negro," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 30, 3 (July-September, 1969), pp. 413-422.
- ¹⁶Idem., "Dr. Benjamin Rush and the American Medical Revolution," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, v. 110, 4 (August, 1966), p. 231.
- ¹⁷Rush, "A Plan of a Peace-Office for the United States," Runes, ed., pp. 19-23. On this millenarian vision of the United States as a Christian commonwealth united in brotherly love, which Rush shared with so many other Americans, see Alan Heimert's encyclopedic *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), passim.
- ¹⁸Runes, ed., p. 21. That these anguished words should have had a wide audience at the time is reconfirmed by M.E. Bradford, among other scholars, who has shown that, out of the fifty-five men who signed the proposed Federal Constitution in 1787, no fewer than fifty were members of established Christian communions; almost thirty of them were leaders in the administration of their churches. *A Worthy Company: Brief lives of the Framers of the United States Constitution* (Marlborough, N.H., 1982), Introduction, pp. viii-ix. Also see the present writer's "The Real Bicentennial: the Continual Quest for a Therapy of Order," *Faith and Reason* v. 13, 4 (1986), pp. 353-362.