



1-1-1975

Book Review: Tradition and Reform in Education by Stephen J. Tonsor

James C. Carper

Follow this and additional works at: <http://newprairiepress.org/edconsiderations>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Carper, James C. (1975) "Book Review: Tradition and Reform in Education by Stephen J. Tonsor," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 2: No. 3. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2111>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Educational Considerations* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

book review

STEPHEN J. TONSOR. *Tradition and Reform in Education*. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1974. 250 pp. \$8.95.

"But beyond this my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body." (Eccl. 12:12, N.A.S.B.) To educators who have attempted to keep abreast of the plethora of books related to educational reform written over the past decade the advice of the wise Solomon needs no divine sanction, it is a self-evident truth! Ivan Illich argues that the schools must be disestablished. Robert M. Hutchins demurs and says that the schools must stay. Schools have virtually no impact on student performance according to Christopher Jencks. Joel Spring suggests that schools have a significant impact on students in that they serve as instruments of rigid social control. The title of Stephen J. Tonsor's book, **Tradition and Reform in Education**, suggests another addition to the platitudinous statements concerning the need to reform the American educational enterprise. However, titles can be misleading and such is the case with Tonsor's work. His book is actually a collection of twenty-three timely and stimulating essays which focus on three broad topics: Images of Society, The Crisis in Education, and Christian Education.

It is one of the chief virtues of Tonsor's book that it illuminates the landscape of American social and cultural history and allows the reader to see that social, cultural, and technological changes reflect themselves in the quest for educational change. The school is seen as the society in microcosm. Hence the disorder in our educational enterprise reflects the perplexity present in our society.

Surveying the contours of contemporary society, Tonsor identifies anti-rationalism and attempts to throw off the burden of the past as primary contributors to the current cultural malaise. The extent to which irrationality, or "mindlessness" as Charles Silberman called it, has permeated American society can be demonstrated by the fact that the citadel of rationality, the university, has been unable to withstand the pressures of unreason and violence. Noting the liabilities of a society which has embraced irrationalism and severed itself from its roots, Tonsor correctly stresses the need to revivify "the symbols which the past has created and the experience which engendered those symbols." (p. 86)

Pointing to the increasing uniformity of the American educational enterprise, Tonsor argues that the needs of education can best be met in the private sector. He feels that government's role in education should be limited to disburs-

ing tax revenue and maintaining standards. By adopting the use of the voucher system on the elementary and secondary levels and the payment of full cost tuition assisted by a federal student loan program for post-secondary education, Tonsor feels that public education will be forced into competition with private education. This would enable parents to choose the elementary or secondary school their children would attend and thus encourage freedom and pluralism, two values which are being vitiated by excessive involvement in education on the part of the national government. Tonsor also argues convincingly that such a policy would reintroduce diversity in higher education and encourage both realism and seriousness on the part of the student.

Without doubt, some of Tonsor's most pertinent commentary concerns the spirit of liberal education. Eschewing the temptation to discuss liberal education in terms of course content, he calls for a restoration of liberal education based on metaphysical questions. Assuming correctly that there is a growing hunger in today's society for the life of the spirit, Tonsor asserts that liberal education must deal with the great ontological questions: "Who am I?", "What am I?" and "Where am I going?" He posits that an education which ignores these questions is unsound.

Tonsor concludes his book with a series of essays on Christian education. Arguing that Christian education is not an anachronism, he challenges Christian educational institutions to respond to the most crucial need of contemporary society, the need for spiritual rejuvenation. However, before this need can be met, the church-related colleges must reclaim the identity they lost in trying to imitate the secular universities. To accomplish this, Christian educational institutions must provide for a sense of community with God, temper mankind's skills with Christian purpose, and minister to spiritual needs.

Tradition and Reform in Education is a significant contribution to the social foundations of education and American cultural history. Though some of Tonsor's proposals run counter to prevailing orthodoxy, educators should find these provocative essays worthy of consideration and reflection. Lacking the polemical tone of many current criticisms of education, the book is written in a graceful yet scholarly style. Tonsor's ideas are clearly reasoned and cogently presented. Although several of the essays are somewhat repetitious, the book is amply stocked with fresh insights into perennial problems and should be perused by all who are interested in the American educational enterprise.

by James C. Carper

EDUCATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS