

# Warping Character

By T.E. Wilder

*Shaping Character: Moral Education in the Christian College*, by Arthur F. Holmes, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991) 82 pages, bibliography.

Contra Mundum, No. 3, Spring 1992

---

The philosopher Richard Taylor claimed that if “I were ever to find, as I luckily never have, a man who assured me that he really *believed* Kant’s metaphysical morals, and that he modeled his own conduct and his relations with others after those principles, then my incredulity and distrust of him as a human being could not be greater than if he told me he regularly drowned children just to see them squirm.” The same can be said about the proponents of moralism, except that one meets them all the time. The most vicious and debased human practices can be, and daily are, justified in terms of moralism: abortion is “compassion for women” and its promotion “a concern about injustice and oppression” and “giving women their rights”. Similarly, the pro-homosexual propaganda that the administration of the University of Minnesota, to take one example, is currently raining down on the students, is couched in terms of “sensitivity”, “respect for diversity” and opposition to “intolerance and hate”. Over the course of this century there have been many examples in the political realm as well of the most monstrous abuses of various regimes defended and praised by moralizers.

*Shaping Character* is a handbook for indoctrination in moralism. The author, Arthur F. Holmes, who corrupts the youth in his capacity of ‘chair’ of the philosophy department at Wheaton College, was coordinator of the “Ethics Across the Curriculum” project of the Christian College Consortium funded by the Pew Charitable Trust, and has distilled his experience in this book. Holmes’s highly celebrated earlier book, *The Idea of a Christian College* has made his name synonymous with Christian higher education. The present book ought to make it a symbol of neo-evangelicalism’s final decadence.

“The activist 1960s”, he says, “awakened the social conscience of educators” and scholars came up with all sorts of new kinds of ethics: business ethics, environmental ethics, even computer ethics. There were new journals, new books, new organizations, and the secular campuses were even building ethics centers. In short, with all the modern developments ethics “across the curriculum” had now become “a realistic goal”.(p.4) Well, obviously,

the Christian colleges just had to do it too!

If one has a foundation grant, it is necessary to formulate goals, in order to submit an evaluation report at the end. Consequently Holmes has ready a list of objectives “that moral education in a Christian context should include”.

1. Consciousness-raising
2. Consciousness-sensitizing
3. Values analysis
4. Values clarification
5. Values criticism
6. Moral imagination
7. Ethical analysis
8. Moral decision making
9. Responsible agents
10. Virtue development
11. Moral identity (p. 6)

This list structures most of the book, and, yes, “values clarification” means what you think it does. Citing Sidney Simon (*Meeting Yourself Halfway: Thirty-One Values Clarification Strategies for Daily Living*, Argus Communications, 1974), Holmes tells us “Values clarification tries to help people look at their own lives and see what their own values really are.”(p. 36) It proceeds by the discussion, role-playing, etc. with which we already have been made nauseatingly familiar by the critics of state elementary and secondary schools.

But, to return to the head of the list:

Consciousness-raising is perhaps the easiest to accomplish both in the classroom and outside: it happens to a freshman as she meets her peers from other socioeconomic backgrounds, as she takes introductory courses in the social sciences, as visiting speakers alert her to the rape of our natural resources, or as she gets involved in some student ministry. She becomes aware that things in this world are not ideal; that people suffer from want and prejudice and outright oppression; that administrative procedures and structures in business and government, along with ideological rigidity, can contribute to the problem rather than alleviate it; that competitive power-mongering often takes precedence over compassion and problem solving; that people are hurting.

By then consciousness sensitizing is also occurring, as our student begins to care, to feel compassion, to writhe at injustices. It is a small step to the values analysis that tries to uncover the effective values of those who are responsible for existing policies or who make the decisions that effect people for better and for worse.(p. 6).

In short, the Christian College Consortium does not even approach the subject of ethics until the students have first been turned into proper little socialists ready to approve the politically correct theories. Furthermore, Holmes assumes the soundness of behavioristic class analysis (a key event in opening up the students is meeting those of other socioeconomic backgrounds), and he is confident that the students arriving at Wheaton are such Pelagians that they have never heard of the Fall of Man, (or is that “Fall of Persons”?) until they study “social science”. Given the state of so-called evangelical churches his confidence may not be misplaced. His use of the proper feminist lingo assures his safety from assault by the radical ladies in the faculty lounge. One regrets a major omission, however. In the above list of oppressions he never got to the administrative procedures and structures of schools and universities, nor to the ideological rigidity of college faculty. I wonder why.

But how does he make this out to be *Christian* education? Part of the answer lies in identifying certain “Judeo-Christian values”, but it is also a matter of a very special seriousness which the Christian college brings to its moralism. Accordingly, Holmes advances four reasons why ethics has to pervade college instruction. First, education is important. “Education helps shape people, cultivating abilities and qualities that last throughout life and transfer to a myriad of tasks.” That is true enough. Secondly, the “real distinctive” of the Christian college “is a holistic integration of faith and learning, an active penetration of all the disciplines and all life's callings with the beliefs and values that make up a Christian worldview.” That is a statement to be applauded; but what are these beliefs and values? This begins to emerge in Holmes third point that “*values are intrinsic to the very subject matter we teach*”. Here he makes a tricky move because there is an ambiguity hidden in this point. He means to say that there is no neutrality, that any subject is understood and presented in terms of values that are implicit, at least, in the form the subject is given. “All life and learning comes value laden....” He also intends the different claim that each area of life discloses values that are intrinsic to the possibilities it opens up. Thus “honesty”, “justice for all”, “truth and understanding”, “beauty”, and “friendship” are “not arbitrarily imposed on things, but rather inhere in their respective aspects of life.... These values are then objective, not relative to the individual or situation, rooted in universal aspects of our lives in God’s creation.” If you believe that these are two different claims which Holmes has confused then you do not believe in natural law; if you believe the no-neutrality principle is a consequence of the self-disclosure of values inherent in the created order, then you do believe in natural law. Finally, Holmes points out that values are also inherent in how things are taught. “By encouraging questions and challenges to my own interpretation of things I am teaching both honesty and the value of stretching our God-given minds.”(pp. 4, 5)

There used to be a certain sort of professor, especially in fundamentalist schools, who would stand before the class and say: “In my opinion...blah, blah, blah.” That was supposed to be good enough. The student with an enquiring mind was often strongly repelled by that attitude, sometimes in the direction of liberalism. Now a different story is much more common: the student says he almost lost his faith in college; his teachers presented many different theories but gave no indication that they found a reason to

commit themselves to one of them; choosing beliefs seemed arbitrary. There also are values inherent in the way these teachers teach. Holmes sees the value of the worth of the individual embodied in a sort of autonomous free expression. But if the price of this freedom is a relativism in the instruction, the effect is to erode the value of the beliefs the student is committed to, and finally the relativism undermines the value of the individual himself, when he can find nothing of transcending significance to invest himself in. Contrariwise, if the choices the student makes are vitally important, it ought to matter to the teacher that he make the right one. Holmes cannot distinguish between a committed teacher and an authoritarian gas bag, a serious defect in a department chairman. (Oops! That should be 'chair'. Sorry ladies.)

Having laid out his position, Holmes goes on to embalm it in educational jargon. "The environment in which we work is plainly important as we consider what objectives to emphasize or what methods to adopt." That's educationese for "Obviously, circumstances affect how we teach." He mentions the "social ethos", the "theological stance", and the "process of psychological growth". This "social ethos" turns out to be relativism, individualism, and positivism. "Theological stance" is the differing religious traditions from which the Christian colleges draw in their various ways: Roman Catholic natural theology, Reformed biblical law (as expounded by Lewis Smedes, of course, not Rushdoony, Bahnsen, North, or Jordan), or the Lutheran emphasis on Christian liberty. The last he explains this way:

As sinners we experience an inner bondage to sin that shows itself in self-absorption and blindness to the needs of others, in compulsiveness and overanxiety, in a paralyzing burden of guilt. But trust in God's grace liberates us from all of this, so that the justified can live by faith, freed to perform those ordinary tasks which are life's calling.(p. 16)

It's all psychology, you see, and that's great news for educational theorists, who are transformed into saviors. He summarizes Anabaptist and Wesleyan ethics too.

Then comes theory: "empirical studies of cognitive moral development", Kohlberg, "Piaget's structural approach", overcoming "the 'black and white' dualist mentality", "Dear Abbey", mumbo-jumbo. Thus strengthened in his inner man, Holmes, in the following three chapters can undertake the detailed exposition of his eleven objectives listed above. In the end he succeeds in carrying out the mandate expressed in the stirring words of Chicago's late Mayor Daley: "We must rise to ever higher and higher platitudes." There is also more pandering to the evangelical trendies. For example, just across the page from another dip into Luther's theology, under the heading "Learning to Care" is this:

A woman educator who heard me refer to conscience formation remarked that she well remembers when she first *heard* of "the women's problem" and then, in distinction, when she first *saw* it all around her and begin to *feel* its weight.(p. 31)

In deference to those who may be reading this during lunch I will leave out the rest, including the final chapter attacking biblical ethics. (“Proof texting is inadequate”, etc.) It is sufficient to quote the blurb on the back cover.

Arthur Holmes has written a profound book on a timely topic. It ought to be widely read. More importantly, its wise insights and prescriptions ought to be put into practice wherever people care about faithful and effective Christian higher education.

This is the judgement of Fuller Seminary’s Richard J. Mouw. What could be more damning?

Holmes does not argue for the theories behind the pinko, fem-fascist and eco-freak patter that runs through this book. Instead, he confidently assumes that these are the only options for thinking Christians, and never imagines that his educated readers might disagree. It is only the college freshmen who still require conversion, and, of course, that is what this book is about. While there are individual faculty in various schools who oppose the consensus that Holmes represents, he exhibits the general condition of most prestige evangelical colleges, especially their administrations. Holmes makes clear what their real religion is.